

Minutes of the OFFLU Steering Committee Meeting 25 November 2008, FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy

Present:

Members of the Steering Committee: Prof. Steve Edwards (Chairman), Dr Juan Lubroth (FAO), Dr Gideon Brückner (OIE)

Others: Dr Joseph Domenech (FAO), Dr Gwenaelle Dauphin (FAO), Dr Keith Hamilton (OIE), Dr Ilaria Capua (Secretary OFFLU), Dr Liz Mumford (WHO observer), Ms Sara Linnane (OIE)

Participated by telephone:

Dr Cristobal Zepeda (Member of the Steering Committee), Dr Bhudipa Choudhury, Dr Mia Kim

Prof. Edwards opened the meeting by welcoming all the participants.

Review of OFFLU objectives

The first objective should be amended to read “To exchange scientific data and biological materials (including virus strains) within the network, to analyse such data, and to share such information with the wider scientific community”

Action: Secretariat to amend the OFFLU objectives on the website.

Prof. Edwards agreed that the objectives are “fit for purpose”.

Dr Lubroth voiced his opinion that OFFLU should not be limited to avian influenza but should include other influenza viruses as these also have health implications. Prof. Edwards pointed out that OFFLU was set up specifically for avian influenza, although it is not limited to H5N1. Avian influenza does not operate in isolation of other influenzas and any scientist working on avian influenza would be aware of this. OFFLU would continue to focus uniquely on avian influenza, but may in the future expand to include other species.

Regarding the minutes of the previous Steering Committee meeting, held by teleconference on 3 April 2008, Prof. Edwards pointed out that no progress had been made with the issue of nominating observers from different regions to the Executive Committee. Following discussions, it was agreed to hold an annual meeting of both the Steering and Executive Committees and to nominate representatives from Africa (both North and Sub-Saharan), the Americas, Asia and Europe to act as observers at this meeting.

Action: OFFLU Secretariat to organise this meeting (dates, venue and list of nominees).

Update on OFFLU activities

Dr Keith Hamilton and Dr Gwenaelle Dauphin briefed the meeting on progress being made by the OFFLU technical activities

Biosafety:

Biosafety Guidelines for Handling Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Viruses in Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratories had been drafted and would be posted on the OFFLU web site and incorporated into the avian influenza chapter of the OIE *Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals*. Dr Lubroth requested the following amendment: “Personnel protective equipment should be worn,

including solid-front laboratory coats, gloves, safety glasses and respirators with greater than or equal to 95% efficiency".

A need to provide guidance on disinfection and decontamination was identified, which should include peer-reviewed reference to approved disinfectants for organic matter as well as for steel. This will be referred to the chairman of the biosafety group. New expert members may need to be sought for this technical activity.

Action: Secretariat to amend guidance and publish on OFFLU website. Secretariat to contact Dr Schmitt re: disinfectants.

Standardisation of reference sera for avian influenza A viruses of subtype H5

Dr Ian Brown hopes to have reference sera from participating laboratories within the next 4 weeks. He has contacted the other Reference Laboratories for inter-laboratory testing, and, according to his work plan, should have results, including standard reference sera by March 2009. Prof. Edwards pointed out that he should send his progress report and data to the OIE Biological Standards Commission, which next meets in February 2009.

Action: Secretariat to ask Ian Brown to submit updated progress report during January

Reference standards for PCR:

Dr Timm Harder had sent a progress report of the project to produce RNA reference standards for the polymerase chain reaction. Clarification should be sought on whether FLI will produce and distribute the standards; FLI may wish to charge for this service.

Vaccination

This group should be reminded that it had agreed to develop some text for inclusion in the avian influenza chapter in the OIE *Terrestrial Manual* on vaccine efficacy and quality. Dr Dauphin presented the outcomes of this group and the first meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, held on 14 November 2008 that followed the review meeting of the OFFLU project (12–13 November). It was agreed that vaccination strategies are complicated and not for this group, which should keep to the technical activity outlined in its terms of reference. Recommendations for national vaccination strategies should be made separately in individual countries. The FAO could post its vaccination recommendations on the OFFLU web site, pointing out that the FAO had made these recommendations on behalf of OFFLU. The group should report back to FAO and OIE and not to individual countries. It should focus on protocol development and selection of strains.

Action: Dr Gwenaelle Dauphin to remind Dr Peter Daniels about the text for the OIE *Terrestrial Manual*.

Proficiency testing

Dr Dennis Senne prepared and sent a questionnaire on terms of proficiency tests to all OIE/FAO reference laboratories and a few additional partners (i.e. WHO). He is reviewing the results of this questionnaire and should provide a progress report in time for review by the OIE Biological Standards Commission at its next meeting in February 2009.

Action: Secretariat to ask Dennis Senne to submit updated progress report during January

Diagnostic kits – information about commercially available kits

Dr Marek Slomka has invited new members to the group. He has sent to all members a declaration of conflict of interest. He intends to hold a meeting in Athens, Georgia, USA, taking advantage of the 7th International Symposium on Avian Influenza that will be held there in 2009.

Technical issues at the human–animal interface

Currently being developed by Dr Mumford (WHO) and Dr Capua (OFFLU), it will include a strategy and mechanism for sharing important information at the human–animal interface. See also below.

Applied epidemiology (update received in the afternoon by Dr Zepeda)

The group had its first meeting in September, where it defined its terms of reference and developed a work plan. The main task was for the group to provide consultancy. Several actions were identified and need to be taken forward. Prof. Edwards congratulated Dr Zepeda on a good start to the work.

The Steering Committee agreed that membership of the technical activities should be agreed by the Executive Committee and that the Steering Committee does not need to approve this.

Update from the two OFFLU Scientists

The two OFFLU Scientists, Dr Bhudipa Choudhury and Dr Mia Kim, briefly updated the meeting on their activities. Dr Choudhury had submitted her first 6-month report in June 2008 and so summarised her work outputs from this point. Dr Kim was close to completing her first 6-month report: these reports include proposed future activities.

Dr Mia Kim has begun her mission to Indonesia and will remain there for 5 months. So far she is working through the administrative part of the OFFLU project on vaccination in Indonesia while also analysing data so that antigenic cartography can be expanded. She has received advice from a lawyer on the issue of intellectual property and patents. The FAO-led vaccine project in Indonesia is labelled as at 'OFFLU project' and should remain as such.

Both Dr Choudhury and Dr Kim received training in antigenic cartography (in October 2008, Erasmus University) and were also involved in the OFFLU Molecular and Antigenic Characterisation workshop in Indonesia. Dr Choudhury had also taught at two other molecular biology/bioinformatics courses hosted at VLA, Weybridge.

Dr Choudhury described her collaboration with the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute to generate sequencing pipelines for avian influenza. She was awaiting feedback on samples that had been submitted from Bangladesh, data for which are not yet available in the public domain. VLA is trying to make as much data available as possible including genetic sequences using open access databases: Dr Choudhury had been involved in other VLA-based activities aimed at information sharing.

The Steering Committee agreed that it would be very useful to organise an 'OFFLU day' with all the people involved in the technical activities so that they can be updated on what has been completed to date and what remains to be done, etc. This could be organised to coincide with the avian influenza symposium to be held in Georgia in 2009.

Action: The OFFLU Secretariat should take this proposal forward

Avian influenza at the Human–Animal Interface

Dr Ilaria Capua and Dr Liz Mumford updated the meeting on the conclusions of this joint FAO/OIE/WHO technical consultation, which was held in Verona, Italy from 7 to 9 October. The main conclusion was that viruses of subtypes other than H5N1 also need to be monitored. Another meeting was planned to be held in 18 months' time to bring all sectors together to share information and experiences.

World Bank training database

Given that it is difficult to manage a training database specifically for OFFLU, the Steering Committee agreed to use the World Bank's one. This decision would be published on the OFFLU website so that people would be advised to use it.

Action: Secretariat to provide link to World Bank training database and promote its use by institutions that organise training.

Meeting of the Heads of Laboratories

The Steering Committee agreed that it would be very useful to organise another meeting of the Heads of Laboratories. The OFFLU Secretariat should take this proposal forward; it should be a stand-alone event.

Action: OFFLU Secretariat to organise next head of avian influenza Reference Laboratories meeting.

Legal status of OFFLU

OFFLU has no legal status and no agreement was signed by FAO and OIE at its inception.

Action: Drs Domenech and Vallat to address legal status of OFFLU. Dr Gwenaëlle Dauphin to prepare a draft mandate and circulate for comment.

Avian influenza virus sequence databases

The OFFLU scientists have been evaluating EpiFluDB/GISAID database in consultation with users across the OIE/FAO Reference Laboratory network. Dr Choudhury produced a report on influenza sequence databases for the Steering Committee Meeting.

OFFLU should recommend the concept of sharing and release of information into the public domain rather than use of a particular database.

Further to the OIE Resolution on sharing of avian influenza viruses and data, Dr Choudhury gathered information regarding the amount of data being deposited into the public domain by OIE/FAO Reference Laboratories. In general, it appears those laboratories sharing data prior to the resolution continue to do so. The amount of data sharing does vary and there remain some constraints to sharing.

OFFLU must continue to promote virus and information sharing and do whatever it can to ensure that Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres do this.

Action: OFFLU Secretariat to circulate updated recommendations for comment and provide information/links about all databases on the OFFLU website.

Action: OIE to draft a letter to be sent to all OIE Delegates reminding them of Resolution XXVI adopted at the OIE General Session in May 2008 and their obligations to ensure that it is implemented.

Material transfer agreements (MTA)

OIE and FAO legal advisers have made suggested changes to the MTA.

Action: Dr Gwenaëlle Dauphin to provide Secretariat with final amended version to be posted on the website in pdf format and to recommend that MTAs should only be used as a last resort.

Flu-Lab-Net

Flu-Lab-Net is an electronic communication forum hosted at VLA. It allows for open and closed electronic discussion fora and sharing of information, photographs, documents etc. OFFLU technical activities already use Flu-Lab-Net to communicate. An OFFLU forum could be set up on a fairly conservative budget (approximately 15,000 euros/year) The Steering Committee approved the development of an OFFLU forum on Flu-Lab-Net.

Action: OFFLU Secretariat to take forward the development of OFFLU electronic discussion forum using Flu-Lab-Net.

Next meeting:

The next meeting of the OFFLU Steering Committee should take place in spring 2009; Secretariat to arrange.