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LONG-TERM INTER-COUNTRY PROGRAMME IN THE
FIELD OF HEALTH LABORATORY SERVICES

Report by the Regional Director

1. INTRODUCTION

The Regional Committee at its twenty-second session considered a report submitted by the Regional Director concerning a long-term inter-country programme in the field of health laboratory services. The Committee on 28 September 1971 adopted resolution WPR/RC22.R19 the operative paragraphs of which read as follows:

"The Regional Committee

"1. RECOGNIZES the necessity of developing an inter-country programme in the field of health laboratory services with a view to improving the reliability and comparability of diagnostic and control tests essential to national and international programmes;

"2. ENDORSES the suggestion of the Regional Director to prepare a directory of public health laboratory services for countries and territories in the Western Pacific Region and the long-term programme proposed;

"3. RECOMMENDS that the inter-country programmes be closely co-ordinated as far as possible with the WHO general programme of activities in the field of laboratory services;

"4. REQUESTS the Regional Director to include the proposals pertaining to Phases I and II in the List of Additional Projects in 1972 and 1973 and to implement them in accordance with the availability of funds."

/This report ...

This report summarizes the progress made in implementing the resolution taking into account, as recommended, inter-country activities related to the WHO general programme in the field of laboratory services.

2. ACTION TAKEN

2.1 Preparation of the Directory of medical and allied laboratories in countries and territories of the Western Pacific

With the assistance of a short-term consultant, an aide-memoire was prepared clearly defining the types of basic information to be included in the Directory with a view to facilitating the exchange of information between laboratories; strengthening regional collaboration in matters of reference and training, providing appropriate assistance in cases of emergency and disseminating information on the existing network of WHO international and regional reference centres and laboratories.

The title of the Directory has been slightly modified to take into account health laboratory services which may not come under the jurisdiction of ministries of health and health departments.

The aide-memoire was sent to nine countries together with a request that they approve the visit of the above-mentioned short-term consultant to collect the required information. During the period 30 January to the end of May 1972, the consultant visited the following countries in the order listed: Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Republic of Viet-Nam, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, Japan and the Philippines. The efforts made by the national authorities to facilitate his task were greatly appreciated. Information from other countries and territories has been obtained through WHO regional and field staff.

The information has been grouped and the form of its presentation prepared. When tabulation has been completed, the part of the Directory relating to each country will be sent to the governments concerned for approval. An introduction will explain in detail the purpose of the Directory, its content, utilization and the revisions to be envisaged. It is intended to place a number of copies at the disposal of each government free of charge; additional copies may be purchased at production cost.

2.2 Inter-country activities concerning the production and control of biological substances

2.2.1 Production and control of freeze-dried smallpox vaccine. This inter-country programme was initiated in 1969. The first phase, during which the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provided considerable

/assistance ...

assistance in the form of freeze-drying equipment, was concerned either with the training of national personnel in production techniques or with revising existing production methods and improving results. China (Taiwan), Malaysia, Philippines, the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Viet-Nam have received assistance during the first phase which will terminate in 1972. The second phase will start in 1973 and will be concerned with the regular control of the vaccines produced to ensure that they meet the required standards of potency, stability and innocuity. The International Reference Centre for Smallpox Vaccine will collaborate in this phase of the work.

2.2.2 Production and control of cholera vaccine. In May 1972, a consultant began visits to countries of the Region that produce cholera vaccine to obtain information on the strains of vibrios utilized and on the methods of production and control employed. He provided advice, investigated any needs that might exist for specialized training, and determined which institutions could collaborate by undertaking the delicate mouse potency test for those countries where this test cannot be performed. This activity continued until the end of July.

2.2.3 Preparatory work for the long-term project for the production and control of biological substances. This programme is scheduled for 1973 according to the tentative timetable submitted to the Regional Committee at its twenty-second session. The project will be closely coordinated with the Organization's general programme in the field of biological standardization.

The first step in preparing for this project has been to obtain from governments information on the exact designations and addresses of the national control authorities and the government and private institutes concerned with the production of immunogenic substances, therapeutic sera, antigens and diagnostic sera.

The second step will be to obtain specific information on subjects such as the mechanism for the official release of biological substances, the different kinds of vaccines, sera and biological reagents produced in each country and available for distribution, and the problems and difficulties particularly encountered in connexion with the availability of international standards and reference preparations, the use made of them and the needs of different countries for them.

The third step will be to study the information received, carry out anonymous quality control tests and thus detect areas where technical assistance is needed. At the same time collaboration between countries in the Region will be stimulated.

/The final ...

The final aim is to ensure that all biological substances utilized for immunization and therapy in human beings are safe, potent and stable, that antigens and diagnostic sera provide reliable and comparable results and that information on new developments in this field is easily available.

2.3 Regional network of laboratories for the diagnosis of smallpox

One consequence of the progress of the world programme of smallpox eradication is that the clinical diagnosis of primary cases has become increasingly difficult. It is therefore essential that diagnostic virology laboratories should be fully conversant with the most suitable and practical techniques of smallpox diagnosis.

To discover how much experience in this field is possessed by existing laboratory staff and what needs exist for refresher training, a questionnaire will be sent to each country of the Region. The replies received may lead either to the organization of a regional training course on the laboratory diagnosis of smallpox or to the attribution of individual fellowships for specialized training. The questionnaire will also seek information on the availability of existing laboratory services to those countries and territories that are not yet in a position to perform such laboratory diagnosis.

3. WORK PLANNED FOR 1973 - 74

Subject to availability of funds, the second phase of the long-term inter-country programme will be concerned with:

- (a) the organization of training courses in laboratory techniques that are of particular interest for the development of national health laboratory services or of WHO programmes of assistance in that field. A training course on venereal disease serology and bacteriology is planned for 1973 and a training course on the bacteriology of cholera and other enteric diseases, including the production of agglutinating sera, is envisaged for 1974;
- (b) visits of consultants for the preparation of the third phase of the programme.