WHO Prequalification

Ensuring global availability of quality-assured vaccines

WHO supports Member States in providing safe, effective, high quality vaccines against diseases of public health importance. The WHO prequalification programme ascertains that products meet acceptable standards for use in national immunization programmes. Its activities are coupled with regulatory capacity-building to help develop sustainable mechanisms for vaccines quality assurance in Member States. WHO prequalification also facilitates international harmonization of vaccine production standards.

This article gives some background about this long-standing programme and outlines progress and challenges encountered in recent years.

Background

Immunization is key to protecting children from diseases, including polio, measles, diphtheria, and tetanus. Vaccination is one of the most cost-effective health interventions.

To increase access to vaccines of assured quality and safety in Member States, WHO introduced a vaccine prequalification programme in 1987 as a service to UNICEF and other UN purchasing agencies. The norms and standards used for vaccine prequalification are developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. In the 25 years of its existence the prequalification programme has adjusted its procedures to the changing needs.

As more countries routinely immunize children and develop more ambitious national vaccination programmes, the demand for quality products is growing. From 2000 to 2013 the value of the global vaccine market has quadrupled from USD 5 billion to almost USD 24 billion. The number of prequalified vaccines has also grown. The online list on the WHO website includes more than 120 products of 36 different vaccine types, including those that have been in use for a long time – such as diphtheria/tetanus/pertussis vaccine combinations, yellow fever vaccine and oral polio vaccine – as well as new ones, such as pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, rotavirus and human papillomavirus vaccine. Each year, WHO-prequalified vaccines are used to immunize 65% of the world’s birth cohort.

Regulatory oversight

Vaccines are complex biological products. To ensure that all vaccines used by national immunization programmes meet the required standards of quality, safety and efficacy, WHO works in partnership with national regulatory authorities (NRAs) to provide lot-to-lot oversight. In 1996 WHO launched an initiative to strengthen NRAs. An assessment tool was developed to monitor progress and to provide a benchmark for vaccine prequalification for purchase by United Nations agencies. Over the years the tool was revised several times with input from more than one hundred countries. The current version dates from 2011.
Assessment of NRAs using this tool gained a new significance in 2002, when the decision was adopted that the WHO prequalification programme will accept submissions from vaccine manufacturers only if the NRA of the producing country has been assessed as functional against the indicators defined in the assessment tool. This decision has greatly supported WHO efforts to strengthen capacity for vaccine regulation in developing countries.

For the last five years, WHO’s regulatory capacity-building measures have been targeted strategically to emerging economies which impact global vaccine supply. This strategy has a dual goal: to sustain existing functionality of NRA in countries with already prequalified manufacturers, and to strengthen the NRAs of countries with manufacturers interested in vaccine prequalification.

At the end of 2013, 35 of 43 vaccine-producing countries around the world were assessed as functional according to WHO indicators. Of these, 22 supplied at least one WHO-prequalified vaccine, thus broadening the supplier base for safe and effective vaccines of good quality. For example, maintaining functionality, since early 2011, of the China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA) was the catalyst for WHO prequalification of the first vaccine from China in 2012, a live attenuated Japanese encephalitis vaccine. Prequalified vaccines are produced in seven other low- and middle income countries: Brazil, Bulgaria, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Senegal and Thailand.

Engagement with manufacturers
As increasing numbers of vaccines come from countries with NRAs recently declared as functional, there is a need to familiarize manufacturers with the quality standards required by the WHO prequalification programme. In addition to providing detailed online guidance on prequalification requirements and processes, the prequalification team is engaging with manufacturers before submission of applications. This activity has grown significantly in past years. The number of one-on-one meetings with manufacturers increased from 40 in 2008 to 131 in 2012.

The improved guidance has helped to decrease the average time spent by WHO assessors on evaluating dossiers substantially. From 2007 to 2013 the average time from application to prequalification – excluding periods spent waiting for additional data – has almost halved, from 350 to 138 days.

Streamlined procedures
A major revision of the vaccines prequalification process was adopted in 2010 and came into force in January 2012 (5). The revised procedure introduced two significant changes.

Firstly, taking into account the increasing need for regulatory collaboration and risk-based approaches, the revised procedure provides the option for fast-tracked assessment. This option is used if WHO has an official agreement for information-sharing with a mature NRA responsible for the product, usually that of the producing country. The fast-track process shortens the average assessment time. In 2013 WHO assessors spent an average of 82 days on dossiers submitted under this process, compared to 138 days for the standard process.

Secondly, the revision also introduced written criteria defining programmatic suitability for prequalification (6). This addresses a previously unmet need to provide manufacturers with clarity on the desired product design features for use.
in immunization programmes receiving vaccines through UN procurement. Manufacturers now routinely consult WHO at an early stage of developing products for prequalification. This interaction has reduced the time taken by WHO assessors to consider products with non-compliant characteristics.

**Post-prequalification activities**

Even if dossier assessment can be fast-tracked for products from countries with mature regulatory authorities, WHO remains responsible for ensuring compliance with UN tender specifications and programme needs, monitoring product quality and safety, and conducting a targeted testing programme. If there are quality concerns, the supply of prequalified vaccines can be suspended, or the product can be delisted from WHO’s prequalification list. A complete record of issues relating to prequalified vaccines is published on the WHO website (7).

WHO’s post-prequalification work consists of both planned and unplanned activities, which have been increasing over the years as more vaccines have become prequalified (Figure 1). Regular maintenance causes a significant workload; for example the 53 product reviews done in 2012 gave rise to assessment of 448 variations (changes) to prequalified vaccines. In addition, unplanned but urgent activities arise whenever complaints or reports adverse events following immunization (AEFI) are received from the field.

**Prequalification of immunization equipment and devices**

WHO prequalifies not only the actual vaccines but also a comprehensive range of cold chain equipment, injection devices and other products needed for safe and effective immunization delivery. The Performance, Quality and Safety (PQS) scheme for the prequalification of equipment and devices for immunization was introduced in 2006 and became functional gradually during a transition.
period from the previous PIS (Product Information Sheet) system.

The PQS approach to equipment and device prequalification encourages the continuous improvement of existing products whilst remaining open to innovation. The scheme is based on three key criteria for products:

- Performance characteristics that meet the relevant specification standards;
- Quality and reliability characteristics that are appropriate for field conditions, and
- Safety characteristics that ensure that no harm is caused to users, patients or the environment over the course of the product’s life cycle.

In recent years the number of accessory products prequalified through the PQS scheme has increased more than fourfold, from 55 in 2008 to 245 at the end of 2013 (8). As more and more countries are now including requirements for PQS prequalification in their tenders, the scheme goes far beyond UN purchasing. It provides procurement agencies around the world with a list of reliable immunization equipment and devices, each proven to meet user needs.

Regulatory capacity-building

The prequalification programme uses two strategies to promote the implementation of WHO norms and standards for vaccines in countries.

Firstly, regulators from a wide range of WHO Member States are invited to participate in expert meetings to develop of WHO standards. The focus is on the review of scientific evidence for clinical evaluation of vaccines. In this way, participating regulators acquire the specific expertise needed to drive the implementation of the agreed standards actively in their own regulatory environments.

Secondly, WHO organizes implementation workshops for new written WHO standards, using practical examples and case studies. Vaccine lot release, stability evaluation, safety of cell substrates for vaccine production and Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) are examples of priority topics covered.

Vaccine safety

Post-approval surveillance is essential to confirm that vaccines are safe to use in the target populations. To follow up on the safety of vaccines used in Member States WHO created a functional network of countries, including some of the most advanced in terms of vaccine pharmacovigilance.

The participating countries have played a key role in advancing vaccine safety worldwide. They contributed to the Global Vaccine Safety Blueprint objectives (9), leading to the launch of the Global Vaccine Safety Initiative in November 2012 (10). They also proposed implementation models to achieve these objectives and shared their experience with other countries. Regional vaccine safety networks in line with the globally recommended model are being established in three WHO regions: the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the Region of the Americas and the South-East Asia Region.

A key outcome from the network was the definition of a minimum core data set to be collected for AEFI (11). A standard AEFI reporting form was designed and implemented in network countries.
In parallel, a simple, vaccine-specific electronic user interface was developed and has meanwhile been pilot-tested successfully in one country.

The network has provided a good understanding of the opportunities and challenges of managing vaccine safety in
low- and middle-income countries. Each of the network countries has faced major hurdles. Nevertheless, most have made significant progress in detecting and reporting AEFI, and some are now moving beyond minimal capacity to participation in epidemiological risk assessment studies. Valuable lessons have been learned that can be used to improve safety management programmes for other health technologies.

**Conclusion**
WHO has prequalified a wide range of vaccines and related products, and has developed streamlined, risk-based processes to assess products in line with current, stringent regulatory principles. This has enabled faster access to a wide range of needed products for WHO Member States and has promoted international norms and standards for vaccines among manufacturers, regulators and procurers.

A significant challenge facing the WHO vaccine prequalification team is the expanding workload to oversee an increasingly complex range of prequalified products. This expansion has not been matched by a similar increase in funding and resources.

In this context it should be noted that the prequalification service provided by WHO is not intended to be a permanent mechanism to ensure the quality, safety and efficacy of vaccines globally. It is therefore crucial for WHO and Member States to continue their regulatory collaboration and capacity-building initiatives, as urged in May 2014 by the Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly (12).

**References and further reading**
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