

Welcoming address

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Ladies and Gentlemen and Colleagues

It is a great honour to host this International Conference on bluetongue in Italy, especially so during its Presidency of the European Union. I convey to all present the good wishes of the Italian Government and particularly those of Undersecretary for Health, Cesare Corsi, who was unable to attend due to previous commitments.

The opportunity to examine the latest developments concerning bluetongue is very important. It is also important that this meeting is being held in Sicily, a region in the middle of the Mediterranean Basin, so I thank the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale of Sicily and the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale of Abruzzo and Molise – the National Reference Centre – for jointly organising this conference. The fact that this conference is taking place under the aegis of the OIE I believe to be also very important as this organisation has become the reference point for veterinary services worldwide extending beyond political divisions and differences of opinion. The EU has developed favourably within such a framework of diversity and I think the OIE reflects perfectly this standpoint. This is very important because, from a scientific viewpoint, we can now speak with one voice to provide consistent guidelines to decision-makers, having now had the opportunity to go into the scientific details and so reach conclusions useful for disease control. I believe bluetongue to be a paradigm typical of this evolution.

In the past bluetongue has been considered to affect only some regions of the world and was considered to differ from other animal diseases. But the reality is completely different: bluetongue affects nearly all countries and everybody should be made aware of this. To develop strategies which minimise the problem to a purely commercial level would be an under-estimation of the problem. We are all now fully aware of the serious problems raised by bluetongue.

I do hope this International Conference fully assesses the real goals that need to be attained to keep bluetongue under control and to eradicate it, if possible. I hope you will also take important changes into account; by this I mean not only those changes leading to a geographical shift in the disease. For one, we should ask the Veterinary Services to focus more attention on the changes taking place in neighbouring countries. For another, the Veterinary Services believe the problem should be dealt with by them only whereas, in fact, it is very important to assess also the epidemiological situation so as to be able to take immediate action if necessary.

Two events have occurred in the last 10 years which, in my opinion, completely altered the attitude of Governments as to the role of the Veterinary Services. These two events are easily singled out: BSE and FMD. Previously only animal diseases linked directly to public health were considered a high priority but this is a narrow perception which the Veterinary Services now need to deal with. In the case of FMD we have discovered that the stringent control strategies of the seventies and eighties, i.e. the almost wholesale slaughter of animals, have had to be changed completely. Following the last epidemic of FMD to affect Europe we learned that killing animals had both a social and an emotional impact, and so changed the attitudes of the general public and of farmers. You know well that without the support of farmers no disease can be controlled and eradicated. And without the support of the general public no support can be given, and no resources can be obtained, at the political level. I think bluetongue is the ideal field in which new control strategies can be developed. I believe it also provides an example from which the Veterinary Services can learn and so more fully comprehend the importance of animal diseases. We are no longer in an era when the Veterinary Services can impose their strategies without being fully accountable for their actions. Although bluetongue is an animal disease which does not affect human health we still need to show how important animal health interventions are with reference to the development of

livestock production and the social development of the affected farming communities. If this principle is not demonstrated it will be very difficult to obtain consensus.

As you all know bluetongue is a complex disease that is very difficult to control regardless of the strategies implemented. There are various stages: there are animals which are affected directly (such as sheep) and there are animals (such as cattle) which act as amplifiers of the virus. In advanced societies it is difficult to introduce movement restrictions on animals not showing signs of the disease; it is equally difficult to introduce movement restrictions in those countries whose economy and livestock production systems are highly developed. I think a symposium such as this one should devote attention to the most suitable strategies to be implemented to not only guarantee animal health but to minimise also disadvantages, specifically in terms of socio-economic impact. I am aware that this may sound a bit foreign to you, but if these matters are not taken into consideration, the result will be an under-estimation of the impact of this disease.

In regard to those countries where *Culicoides* prevail the disease can reach high latitudes and this is why bluetongue affects both the countries in which the disease is present, and those in which it has not yet occurred. We need to identify the price to be paid to implement a rigorous strategy and we should all pay this price jointly. If we do not consider this, and because human health is not involved, we could become complacent with the result that we will not apply the right strategies.

I must ask a question principally on behalf of those not fully acquainted with the problem: Why is it, when compared to the situation for other diseases, that a vaccinated animal, which has developed antibodies, cannot be moved independently from an infected or from a protection zone?

Another important aspect is the use of vaccines. With the exception of some institutes, which are considered heroes for having developed some technologies, we have not progressed in the use of safe and efficacious vaccines to control not only one serotype, but others too, as at least six now occur in the Mediterranean Basin.

Considering the safety and biosafety aspects, we need to also estimate what the movement, transportation and containment methodologies should be for animals to be moved into areas where the disease is already present. We need also to develop more accurate diagnostic kits as the diagnosis times are too long the results revealing the presence of new serotypes become available only once animals have already started to die.

I do not want to shorten the time of other colleagues wishing to open this conference but I would like to focus your attention on the significance the European Union attaches to this disease; in particular its desire to modify the barriers that have been erected around bluetongue in recent years when the epidemiological situation was considered differently, and how the EU wishes to achieve this in consultation with the OIE and in agreement with scientific developments.

I believe the OIE and its Director, Dr Vallat, are doing their job well. Therefore, besides scientific dissertations, I hope this International Conference will provide solutions which can be considered by all the Governments of Europe and by the OIE itself. The General Session of May is not far off and therefore I hope the OIE chapter on bluetongue might be reconsidered at that time in accordance with your deliberations.

Buon lavoro