UN/SCETDG/24/INF.53

COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE TRANSPORT OF DANGEROUS GOODS AND ON THE GLOBALLY HARMONIZED SYSTEM OF CLASSIFICATION AND LABELLING OF CHEMICALS

Sub-Committee of Experts on the
Transport of Dangerous Goods
Twenty-fourth session
Geneva, 3-10 December 2003
Item 9 of the provisional agenda

Infectious substances

Transmitted by the World Health Organization (WHO)

Background

1. The World Health Organization reproduces below a letter received from the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), requesting the consideration of the Sub-Committee to amend the list of infectious substances that are prohibited from being shipped as UN 3373 (Section 2.6.3.2.2.1 (a)).

2. This paper is submitted to the Sub-Committee to request comments and suggestions and to allow delegations to consult with experts in view of the development of a formal paper for the twenty-fifth session.

Our Ref. ASC/SL 35.285 14 November 2003

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Dear Dr Previsani

The Biological Standards Commission (in brief, Laboratories Commission) of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), met from 17 to 19 September 2003. One of the items the Commission discussed was the issue of packaging and transport of diagnostic samples for animal diseases. The Commission asks for the support of WHO in forwarding the following information to the United Nations Sub-Committee of Experts on Transport of Dangerous Goods (UNSCETDG) for consideration at its meeting in December 2003.

The Biological Standards Commission is responsible for drafting OIE Standards for diagnostic testing, which includes submission of samples. Our OIE expert, Dr James E. Pearson, met the Commission and reported on the Infectious Substance Transport Meeting that was held in Washington DC, from 8 to 9 September 2003, which he had attended as a representative of the OIE. The OIE Commission and I support the recent and planned changes to transport requirements, which will facilitate shipping of diagnostic specimens. Accurate disease reporting is essential to the objectives of the OIE and can only be achieved through the transport of diagnostic specimens to the world-wide network of OIE Reference Laboratories (156 in 36 countries) and National Laboratories.

The Commission also supports the objective of having proper packing requirements that will provide the highest level of safety in the transportation of dangerous goods in order to protect transport industry workers and the environment. The Commission reviewed the 2003 changes, and the proposed 2005 changes, and the following recommendations are based on this assessment of risk to the transport industry and the environment.

The Commission strongly recommended that some changes be made to the list of infectious substances that are prohibited from being shipped as diagnostic specimens. The Members of the Commission found it interesting that the list of 'infectious substances affecting animals only', UN2900, consists of 13 of the 15 OIE List A diseases, and the other two, highly pathogenic avian influenza and Rift Valley fever, are on the list of 'infectious substances affecting humans', UN2814. Neither the Biological Standards Commission nor staff at the OIE Central Bureau has had any input into the recent or proposed changes to the requirements for transportation of infectious substances. This is unfortunate as the OIE has been designated by its 164 Member Countries and the World Trade Organization as the Standard-setting organisation for animal health and zoonoses. It would appear that the OIE List A diseases were assumed to be the appropriate diseases to include on the list of infectious substances that are prohibited from being shipped as diagnostic specimens as they are defined in the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* as "transmissible diseases that have the potential for very serious and rapid spread, irrespective of national borders, that are of serious socio-economic or public health consequence and that are of major importance in the international trade of animals and animal products" (please consult our web site at: www.oie.int).

It appears that an incorrect assumption was made that all OIE List A diseases should be assigned to UN2814 or 2900. Many of the diseases are on OIE List A because of their impact on trade and not because of their transmissibility. The Commission would like to clarify the risk associated with these agents and to recommend changes to the list of agents that must be shipped as 'Dangerous Goods'. For your information, the designation of OIE List A diseases is being re-evaluated. In May 2003, the OIE International Committee, comprising the Chief Animal Health Officials of the 164 Member Countries, concluded that the present system of designating diseases as List A or List B was no longer appropriate and did not reflect the risk associated with these agents. The International Committee adopted a resolution that requested that an improved method of identifying and reporting high-risk animal diseases be developed. The new disease notification criteria and single disease list will be in operation from January 2005.

The Laboratories Commission evaluated the risk of animal disease agents being transmitted to the environment during shipping and concluded that the risk of infecting animals with any of these agents is extremely low. The method of transmission of these agents is usually by contact or insect vectors, and transmission to the environment is very rare. It usually only occurs when there is contamination of an animal holding facility and this is very unlikely during shipping. The risk to humans caused by zoonotic agents will be discussed later. The following are the Commission's specific recommendations:

Rabies, Venezuelan equine encephalitis, and Rift Valley fever: The Commission discussed the risk of these agents being transmitted by tissues that are submitted for diagnostic testing. It concluded that the agents do not pose a significant risk to humans or animals, and recommended that tissues be shipped as 'Diagnostic Specimens' (UN3373); however, the Commission recommended that cultures of these agents be assigned to UN2814. This recommendation accords with the other 'culture only' agents on the list. The requirement for shipping diagnostic tissues as UN2814 agents could have a significant effect on critical disease control and surveillance programmes.

Bluetongue and African horse sickness: These agents are transmitted by insects of the *Culicoides* spp., and there is no contact transmission. As they are not contagious diseases, they should be in Risk Group 3 or lower. The Commission thus recommends they be removed from the list of 'infectious substances affecting animals only' (UN2900).

'Avian paramyxovirus 1–Newcastle disease': The Commission recommended that this agent should be identified as 'Velogenic Newcastle disease'. There are a number of non-pathogenic strains of avian paramyxovirus 1–Newcastle disease that circulate in poultry populations. These strains are ubiquitous throughout most of the world and pose no significant risk. This agent could probably be in Risk Group 1. The OIE has a definition of Newcastle disease that addresses this issue and identifies the pathogenic strains, but it would be difficult to include it in this document. The term velogenic Newcastle disease is therefore recommended as it is commonly used to identify pathogenic strains.

Tissues for the diagnosis of animal agents: As stated previously, the Commission believes that the risk of transmission of animal disease agents to the environment during shipping is minimal. It considers that tissues being submitted for the diagnosis of those animal diseases assigned to UN2900 pose an insignificant risk and could be sent as 'Diagnostic Specimens' (UN3373). Consequently, the Commission recommends that all the agents on the list of 'infectious substances affecting animals', including highly pathogenic avian influenza, be classified as 'culture only'.

The Commission stressed that this recommendation to change all the agents assigned to UN2900 and the three assigned to UN2814 (Rift Valley fever, Venezuelan equine encephalitis and rabies) to 'culture only' is extremely important for disease surveillance and control programmes. As stated previously, the Commission does not believe that these tissues pose a significant risk and that this risk is further reduced by the packaging requirements for 'Diagnostic Specimen', which are not that different than those for agents assigned to UN2900 and UN2841. The increased cost and

restrictions on shipping posed by UN2900 and UN2814 assignations will significantly curtail diagnostic and control programmes. The requirement to ship diagnostic tissues under the more restrictive guidelines will have a significant impact on the developing countries, where many of these diseases are endemic. Restrictions on shipping diagnostic specimens, along with the increased cost of shipping, will have an adverse impact on animal disease control programmes in these countries and thus on food production.

In summary the OIE supports the requirements to facilitate the shipping of diagnostic specimens. I agree with the conclusion of the OIE Biological Standards Commission that changes should be made to the list of infectious substances that are prohibited from being shipped as diagnostic specimens. I also strongly believe that the Commission's recommendations will not produce a significant increased risk to transportation workers or the environment.

I thank you in advance for your help and support.

With best regards,

Yours sincerely

Dr Bernard Vallat
OIE Director General