

Introduction

The WHO Expert Consultation on Rabies met in Geneva from 5 to 8 October 2004. Dr Hiroyoshi Endo, Director, Control, Prevention and Eradication, Communicable Diseases welcomed the participants on behalf of the Director-General. He pointed out that more than 99% of all human rabies deaths occur in the developing world, and that the disease has not been brought under control throughout most of the affected countries. Although effective and economical control measures are available, their application in developing countries is hampered by a range of economic, social and political factors.

A major factor in the low level of political commitment to rabies control is a lack of accurate data on the true public health impact of the disease. It is widely recognized that the number of deaths officially reported in most developing countries greatly underestimates the true incidence of disease, with several factors contributing to widespread underreporting. In turn, underreporting leads to lack of attention by national authorities in much of Africa and Asia, and by the international organizations concerned. Disparities in the affordability and accessibility of post-exposure prophylaxis, levels of rabies awareness and risks of exposure to rabid dogs result in a skewed distribution of the disease burden across society, with the major impact falling on members, particularly children, of poor rural communities.

Dr François-Xavier Meslin, Coordinator, Strategy Development and Monitoring of Zoonoses, Foodborne Diseases and Kinetoplastidae reminded the participants of the numerous rabies activities conducted by WHO since the last meeting of WHO Expert Committee on Rabies held in 1991. WHO has been working with its collaborating centres, its rabies specialists and other partners in both the public and private sectors to conduct new assessments of the rabies burden in selected countries as well as globally to promote the development of alternative technologies, such as the intradermal route for post-exposure prophylaxis, monoclonal antibody cocktail to replace human and equine rabies immunoglobulins and oral vaccination of dogs through vaccine-loaded baits. As part of the new thrust for rabies control in Asia,

formulated during the WHO International Consultation on Rabies Control and Eradication in Asia, held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2001, WHO has convened a number of coordinating meetings in Asia to strengthen national capacity to tackle rabies, raise the level of awareness and develop an interregional network of opinion leaders who could bring rabies prevention and control to the forefront.

Dr Alexander Wandeler was elected Chairperson and Dr Betty Quiambao and Dr Winyi Kaboyo were elected Rapporteurs.

The information in this report should be considered the most current information on rabies prevention and control and supersedes that of the eighth report of the WHO Expert Committee on Rabies (1).