Avian influenza and wildlife: the OIE standards

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Avian influenza, a disease of poultry known for years, can cause devastating losses to the poultry industry and wildlife infections. The current H5N1 strain with its rapid spread over continents and its pandemic potential has led to a new unprecedented global influenza crisis. The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), founded in 1924, plays an active role in the current effort to deal with the crisis. As the international standard setting body for animal health, the OIE has defined a new standard for international trade and guidelines on notification of the disease. New definitions for low and highly pathogenic avian influenza, as well as poultry are also provided in the standard for proper implementation of measures.

One of the aims of this new improved standard is to encourage transparent reporting of the disease, including the presence in wildlife, while avoiding unjustified trade barriers. Each affected or at risk country should also have a compensation mechanism in place to encourage animal owners to report sick animals. All official notifications are published immediately on the OIE website and the member countries are informed through the OIE early warning system.

The OIE recommends eradication of the disease at animal source and states that once H5N1 is introduced into a country, appropriate control measures must be taken in poultry and not in wildlife. Eradication at animal source is essential to reduce virus load in the environment, minimize economic losses for the farmers and diminish the risk of a possible pandemic. Spread amongst poultry should be prevented by the use of classical eradication methods, sanitary measures and, under certain circumstances, vaccination. It is essential that infected or at risk countries that are unable to mobilise the necessary resources receive direct technical assistance.

Wildlife, trade, human and animal movements all play a role in the spread of the virus and the respective roles need further investigation. The control of the disease in poultry can be done only through adequate investments in the veterinary infrastructure and strong commitments. Coordination between international organisations, donors, private sector and other stakeholders is crucial.

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