

A centuries-old challenge in Rome



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The city of Rome is home to one of the oldest public health facilities in Europe, Santo Spirito in Saxia Hospital. Santo Spirito, first constructed in the 8th century, went on to face many of the public health and social challenges of its times.

In the early 18th century, one of those challenges was rinderpest, or cattle plague, which was crisscrossing Europe and Asia, wiping out entire herds of domesticated and wild animals, and taking a toll on human livelihoods and food supplies.

Pope Clement XI ordered Santo Spirito's chief physician, **Giovanni Maria Lancisi**, to study rinderpest.

In 1711, Lancisi began writing what would become the world's first book-length manuscript on the disease.

Today, it is part of a historic, 20-thousand-volume collection of writings kept in the Lancisi Library.

Lancisi wrote down eleven specific recommendations for responding to and preventing the spread of rinderpest, including the use of quarantines.

The recommendations made by Lancisi and other researchers led several countries in Europe to adopt quarantines and order health certificates on imported animals. They were only part of long series of scientists, researchers and leaders who would seek to control repeated outbreaks of rinderpest.

Lancisi also recommended that medical education create a specialization in animal health. This thinking contributed to the establishment, in 1761, of the world's first veterinary school in Lyon, France.

Rinderpest was high on the list of challenges facing agriculture when in 1945, the United Nations established the Food and Agriculture Organization as a specialized agency.

In 1994, FAO formed the Global Rinderpest Eradication Programme to coordinate international efforts and to provide technical guidance and financial support, in close coordination with the World Organisation for Animal Health and other institutional partners, national governments and donors like the European Union.

Three hundred years after Lancisi wrote his book about rinderpest, the global campaign to eradicate rinderpest can finally claim success.