Editorial

LabNet in the heat of the action

A rubella outbreak in Tonga; the appearance of a new illness, the West Nile fever, along the outskirts of the Pacific region; and the unremitting spread of the Type 1 dengue fever virus throughout the Pacific islands since 2000 fill the surveillance and response pages of this 13th issue of Inform’ACTION. This information aptly illustrates the latest advances in the “LabNet” laboratory network, presented in the LabNet activities section. As usual, the issue provides short reports on meetings and training sessions directly related to the PPHSN.

In April 2002, measles and rubella, two similar diseases, reappeared in two different locations in the Pacific. In fact, several cases of measles were confirmed in Guam during that period (see article published in Inform’ACTION #12) and a rubella outbreak, marked by a significant number of cases of encephalitis, was declared in Tonga as we learn from the report by Dr. Seini Kupu, to whom we express our sincerely thanks.

Although West Nile fever has not yet affected the Pacific region, it is not far away since it has now reached the west coast of the United States. This disease, which is an emerging zoonosis caused by a flavivirus that mosquitoes transmit from birds to susceptible mammals, including humans, can, then, be considered a threat to the Pacific. In this issue, you will find a fact sheet about the disease compiled by our veterinary colleagues at SPC’s Regional Animal Health Service.

We could not close out this issue’s surveillance and response pages without talking about the ravages of the DEN-1 epidemic that has been affecting our region for more than two years now. What’s more this outbreak reaffirms and perfectly illustrates the primordial role laboratories play in the rapid and efficient identification of outbreaks. Dr. Alain Berlioz-Arthaud of the New Caledonia Pasteur Institute, the LabNet technical focal point, explains this in further detail:

In mid-2000, the DEN-1 virus, which probably arrived from southeast Asia, reappeared in the northern part of the region, more exactly in Palau (Belau). The year 2001 was marked by its spread to the eastern part of the zone, where it was reported in the Cook Islands, Samoa, Hawaii and, most significantly, in French Polynesia where the epidemic exploded with the number of cases estimated at some 33,000 (see summary on page 14). In 2002, the virus slowly spread toward the western part of the zone; cases of local transmission were reported in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and two outbreaks were declared in October, one on Wallis and the other in Fiji (see update on page 12).

More than ever, with the cyclone season, the risk of outbreaks exists throughout the region and we have to be prepared to identify them as quickly as possible. At the same time, other infectious agents that create problems for differential diagnoses, e.g., malaria or leptospirosis, are also being actively transmitted.
During the EpiNet I and II workshops, early and effective outbreak identification strategies were proposed based, in particular, on the role of laboratories, and the need to have front-line tests was stressed. To assist in the selection of these tests, whose are often only mediocre in terms of specificity, the New Caledonia Pasteur Institute evaluated a certain number of tests used to diagnose dengue fever and leptospirosis (see page 15).

These evaluations will be discussed during the LabNet meeting scheduled to be held in Suva in March 2003. This first meeting of the region’s field pathologists will make it possible to plan LabNet’s development over the coming years and help strengthen the often-friendly professional ties which already unite us. At the centre of these debates will be, most notably, transmission of lab samples in the region, relationships between laboratories at various levels, the choice of tests to be used, professional training, and high quality outside programmes.

To close, you will find some information about meetings and training sessions related to the PPHSN which took place between September and December 2002.

We hope you find this issue interesting.

Happy 2003 from all our editorial staff.

Christelle Lepers
Alain Berlioz-Arthaud,
New Caledonia Pasteur Institute