

A CENTURY OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE OF EPIZOOTICS: THE ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION

* Ivo Zoccarato – DVM, Formerly Full Professor of Animal Production, University of Turin (Italy).

Corresponding author: ivzccrt@gmail.com

* Daniele De Meneghi – DVM, Associate Professor of Epidemiology and Veterinary Public Health, Dpt. of Veterinary Sciences - University of Turin (Italy)

* Giorgio Battelli – DVM, Formerly Full Professor of Parasitology and Parasitic Diseases of Animals, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna (Italy)

* Italian Association for the History of Veterinary Medicine and Farriery, L.go P. Braccini 2, 10095 Grugliasco (Turin) Italy

Abstract

The authors retrace the most important steps of Italy's contribution to the International Office of Epizootics (OIE), today World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) since its foundation. The main Italian representatives and the roles they have played in this century of activity are recalled.

“On the road to” International Office of Epizootics (OIE)

By Law n. 1961, 3 August 1928, the Italian government approved the country's membership of the OIE. Italy had joined from the very first moment in 1924 with the signature of the memorandum by Baron Romano Avezzana, at that time ambassador in Paris. Among the 24 founding nations, Italy ranked in the first class which involved a monetary contribution of 500 FF per unit (Italy counted for 25 units).

The first steps

The aspiration, and the need, to establish a system of common rules shared by all countries to prevent the spread of infectious livestock diseases was the driving force, and the main theme, behind the first international veterinary medicine congress organised in Hamburg in 1863 by John Gamgee and Eduard von Hering¹. Later, in 1872, due to the resurgence of rinderpest in Europe, an International Conference was held in Vienna at the invitation of the Austro-Hungarian government with the aim of defining common prophylactic measures against rinderpest. The major European countries took part in this conference: Germany, Belgium, France, England, Italy, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey². A regulation was drafted but, given the apparent 'disappearance' of the disease, it was never adopted, except for a few bilateral agreements between bordering states such as Austria and Italy. It took another fifty years, and a sudden outbreak of rinderpest in Belgium in 1920, for the governments of the European countries to fully realise the importance of these issues and arrive at the establishment of a transnational agency, with the primary goal of ensuring the prompt sharing of data/information on the outbreak of infectious livestock diseases and useful indications for preventing their diffusion. These ideas were materialised at the International Conference for the Study of Epizootics held in Paris in 1921³. As a result, in 1924, an agreement was signed between the participating nations, by which OIE was established. Since 1921, the Italian contribution to OIE has been significant. At the conference, which brought together delegates from 43 countries, Italy was represented by Alberto Lutrario, eminent hygienist physician, Director General (DG) of Public Health, and Carlo Bisanti veterinarian, Director of

the Veterinary Division of the Minister of the Interior; both played an important role in the study Commissions that were set up. At the opening of the conference, Lutrario proposed to the assembly that French senator Alfred Massé, *Président du Comité consultatif des epizooties* of the Agriculture Ministry, be appointed as president of the conference. The proposal was unanimously accepted. Lutrario, DG of Public Health at the Italian Ministry of the Interior since 1912, was also well known and recognised internationally, particularly in Paris. In fact, he was member of the *Office International d'Hygiène et de la Santé* (OIHS), an organism in which he was considered on a par with the greatest international hygienists and epidemiologists⁴. Lutrario had a clear perception of the importance of 'one medicine'. As a professional with great organisational skills, he had, since the beginning of the 20th century, favoured the creation of new inspectors, for the medical and for the veterinary service, moreover he also created one Technical Division for the General Hygiene Service, another one for the Zooiatric Service and finally an Administrative Division with a Secretariat for the High Health Council: this was a revolution in the field of Health organization in Italy.

At the end of the general discussion, three working Commissions were set up: the first was charged with studying how to collect sanitary information and the usefulness of publishing an International Sanitary Bulletin; the second was charged with studying quarantine measures applicable to the export of livestock and in such a way to provide all sanitary guarantees to importing countries; the third was given the task to examining the possible creation of an International Bureau with the aim to combat the spread of infectious livestock diseases. Lutrario was 'acclaimed' president of the third Commission. On the basis of his background, the experience in work reorganisation which characterised his ministerial task, as well as his involvement in the OIHS, Lutrario launched the proposal of a system with distinct technical sectors (human and veterinary medicine), but functionally linked for all administrative and prophylaxis aspects under the umbrella of the OIHS. He opined that the new Office would have an easier life if it was linked to the OIHS, which nevertheless dealt with a similar subject: prophylaxis, and the fundamental of prophylaxis are similar whether it concerns communicable diseases of humans or animals⁵. At the conference end, the general assembly mandated Lutrario, together with Emmanuel Leclainche and Henri Pottevin to be available to the French authority for the draft of the convention agreement.

Bisanti, the second Italian representative, was appointed rapporteur of the second Commission. In December 1927 he was appointed by the Italian government as permanent delegate to the OIE. Due to this delay in appointment, no Italian attended the first meeting of the OIE, when Dr Henri De Roo was elected president and Prof. Leclainche was appointed Director. Bisanti attended OIE committee meetings continuously until 1938, when the Italian political situation forced him to resign. Bisanti took an active part in the work of the OIE both on technical and scientific level, he was a speaker on topics such as the use of the anti-rabies vaccine, on brucellosis, and he actively participated in the life of the organisation: in 1934, together with H.C.L.E. Berger president, he was elected vice-president, a position to which he was re-elected in 1938. In 1933, he was also appointed OIE representative at the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome¹. Together with Leclainche, Berger and Gottlieb Flükiger, he was one of the four who identified the building at 12 rue de Prony, in Paris, that became the OIE headquarters in 1939. It is worth mentioning that Bisanti as young graduate (from 1901-1903) stayed in Paris for two years as an assistant to Prof. Edmond Nocard at Maisons Alfort, certainly such stay favoured him in relations with French colleagues².

¹ KNAB C. *Pathogen crossing borders Global animal diseases and international responses, 1860-1947*. Routledge, New York, 2022.

² *Necrologio del prof. Carlo Bisanti*, Veterinaria Italiana, 19: 573 – 575, 1968.

After II World War

When international relations began to normalise, the new representative for Italy was Prof. Iginio Altara who, in 1949, had been appointed DG of the Italian High Commission for Hygiene and Public Health (A.C.I.S.), covering the role that had been Bisanti's. Like his predecessor, Altara had previously spent some time in France in the mid-1920s to complete his training together with Prof. Henri Vallée at Maisons Alfort Vet School. In 1950, he was also elected vice-president of the OIE to reinforce the esteem in which his predecessor had been held¹. Altara did not demerit and two years later was elected president of the Office (1952-1955). This one was a second moment of special commitment for Italy. Altara collaborated with Gaston Ramon, who had become Director of the OIE in 1949 and, in 1952, at the director's request, he presented a report on the status of foot-and-mouth disease in Italy, the very disease which was also sweeping at the same time the rest of Europe. As a rapporteur and then as Italian delegate to the OIE, he presented at the 19th General Session in May 1951 a remarkable report on the epizootiology of Equine infectious anemia and, in 1953, in collaboration with A. Serra and G. Guarini, a study on the complement fixation reaction in the diagnosis of this disease. In 1954, he proposed the conference 'Mediterranean Parasitology', that was held jointly with F.A.O., in Rome from 4th to 7th November 1954. Altara held the role of Italian delegate until 1961, when he retired, but before leaving the OIE he had the initiative to propose the setting up of a permanent Commission dedicated to the study of fish diseases². The following year, the Commission was set up and he was its first chairman with Pietro Ghittino, one of the fathers of modern ichthyopathology, its secretary, who chaired such Commission from 1965 to 1980. In 1962, Altara and Ghittino, under the patronage of the OIE, organised the first European conference on fish diseases and fish food inspection in Turin. Ghittino was responsible for proposing the first list of transmissible diseases and the resulting prophylaxis rules which were adopted internationally³.

The recent past

In the second half of the 20th century, it should be mentioned Luigino Bellani, Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) of the Italian Veterinary Services (1967-1991) and permanent delegate to OIE. His contribution of innovative ideas was always very remarkable. Bellani, together with Adriano Mantovani, awarded by the OIE in 1989 for its contribution to Veterinary Public Health, believed that it was necessary to propose veterinary socio-economics as a topic for discussion at the international level. Indeed, thanks also to him, the technical topic 'Animal health and economics' was included in the 48th General Session, in 1980. One year later, the topic was extended to the aspects of health information, planning and evaluation of interventions. The Italian participation in both Sessions was gratifyingly successful. The papers presented proved not to be the *outcome of improvisation but the result of a common serious and rigorous commitment*⁴ of many representatives of Italian Institutions and Organisations, including non-veterinary ones. Moreover, Bellani was the first CVO in the world to propose the admission of China as OIE member, that was approved after his death. In 1994, he was awarded the OIE Medal of Merit. Previously, the medal had been awarded to Giuseppe Boldrini who had taken part in the work of the OIE lengthy, together with Prof. Altara.

In recent years, it should be mentioned the scientific contributions by Prof. Vincenzo Caporale, the only Italian vet, to-date, appointed twice as president of OIE Specialist Commissions: Scientific Commission for animal diseases, (2003-2009) and Biological Standard Commission (2009-2015). He was Coordinator of the joint Italian Ministry of Health-OIE program for epidemiological surveillance and food safety in the Mediterranean basin (2009-2011) and Director of two OIE Collaborating Centres,

¹ Bull. Off. Int. Epiz. *Compte rendu de la dix-huitième session générale du Comité de l'Office*, Tome XXXIV, 502-505, 1950.

² Bull. Off. Int. Epiz. *Compte rendu de la vingt-huitième session générale du Comité de l'Office*, Tome LIV, 739-740, 1960.

³ Bull. Off. Int. Epiz. *Liste internationale des maladies contagieuses des poissons*, 65 (7-8):1165-1172, 1966.

⁴ BELLANI L., *Lettera ai membri della Delegazione italiana partecipanti alla 48^a Sessione Generale dell'OIE*, Direzione Generale dei Servizi Veterinari, Roma, 10 Luglio 1980, prot. n. 600.3/24442/16.

housed at *Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell'Abruzzo e del Molise*, Teramo (Italy). It must also be mentioned Romano Marabelli, who held important roles (CVO, Head of Department, Secretary General) at the Italian Ministry of Health. He was elected OIE President (2000-2003), awarded with Gold Medal in 2006 and appointed Personal Advisor to the WOAHP Director General since 2017 to-date.

Conclusions

Italy has long provided a significant technical and scientific contribution to the OIE's activities. Today, seven Collaborating Centers¹ and twenty-eight Reference Laboratories², housed in many *Istituti Zooprofilattici Sperimentali* and Laboratories of the Italian Ministry of Health are operational. This achievement is also thanks to the commitment of OIE Italian representatives over the past hundred years.

Acknowledgements

Authors are indebted grateful to Dr. Aline Rousier, head of WOAHP Documentation Center, Dr. Pierluigi Piras and Prof. Vincenzo Caporale for the information they provided that enabled us to write this article.

¹ (last accessed 07 July 2024)

² (last accessed 07 July 2024)