



Pan American Health Organization
Regional Office of the
World Health Organization

Division of Disease Prevention and Control
Program on Communicable Diseases (HCP/HCT)

PAHO/HCP/HCT/236
Original: Spanish

Strengthening of National and Subregional Capabilities for the Surveillance, Prevention and Control of Emerging and Reemerging Infectious Diseases



(San Salvador, 7–9 May 2001)

This document summarizes the recommendations of the national directors of epidemiology and public health laboratory services of all Central American countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic who participated at a Subregional Meeting on Emerging and Reemerging Diseases, 7-9 May 2001, San Salvador, El Salvador, organized by PAHO's Communicable Diseases Program, Division of Disease Prevention and Control. PAHO's participants included advisers from Communicable Diseases, Laboratories, Vaccines and Immunizations, Health Analysis and Human Resources programs and from the Assistant Director's Office.

I. Creation of the Central American Network for the Prevention and Control of Emerging and Reemerging Diseases (RECACER)

1. Background

In 1992, as a result of the reemergence of cholera in the Region of the Americas and based on Article 42 of the Presidential Declaration of Managua, and in the resolutions of the Central American Ministers of Health Council (COMISCA), Resolution XIV was adopted in the VII Meeting of the Central American Health Sector (RESSCAD) held in San Salvador.

At this meeting, the countries of the sub-region recommended that epidemic control demanded joint collaborative efforts from all the countries. The lack of available resources and scarce possibility of controlling several risk factors contributing to the dissemination of infectious diseases were the underlying reasons to recommend coordinated epidemiological surveillance actions.

Later, at the XIII RESSCAD Meeting in 1997, a proposal was approved to form a Central American Network for Health Information and Communication (INFOCOM), a medium by which the exchange of information concerning planned interventions for priority health problems would be possible. It was foreseen that INFOCOM would develop ten modules, among them, two addressed surveillance of acute infectious diseases, and a third focused on outbreak control.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned background, the countries of the sub-region identified the need for the structuring and/or strengthening of national early warning and rapid response systems. It then followed that the creation of the Central American Network for the Prevention and Control of Emerging and Reemerging Diseases (RECACER) was proposed during the XVII RESSCAD Meeting in 2001.

2. Justification

Outbreaks and epidemics of infectious diseases continue to create serious harm in the sub-region causing significant health, economic and political impact. The nature of these outbreaks is increasingly complex due to the emergence of new pathogens, new risk factors and various ways of diffusing diseases. Among the many factors contributing to the spread of infectious diseases some include intense population movements near border areas, food trade, precarious environmental conditions, health services deficiencies, extreme poverty, and frequent natural disasters.

Both the capacity and ability of public health services to recognize and respond rapidly to the occurrence of outbreaks or epidemics caused by various agents are permanent and growing challenges. The detection, investigation, and organization of timely and efficient interventions require on-going coordination between several service sectors of public health, commerce and academia, including epidemiology, laboratory, water and sanitation, disaster preparedness, health care personnel, food safety, and the scientific research community.

For several years, countries of the sub-region have recognized the need for creating early warning and rapid response systems to control acute infectious diseases of high epidemic potential. However, various factors of political and financial nature have limited the countries' capabilities for the detection, investigation, diagnosis, and control of those diseases. In addition, limited

coordinated efforts among laboratory and epidemiological services have resulted in information that is neither complete nor timely, therefore limiting both sound intervention strategies and processes for decision-making.

A foremost important component in epidemic control is the exchange of information and mechanisms of communication between various national public health institutions at all levels of public health and health care delivery services. A more rapid, efficient, effective, and mainly coordinated response within and between the countries would make it possible to reduce and limit the frequency and severity of infectious disease outbreaks and its dissemination across the sub-region.

By the creation of systematic mechanisms of coordinated actions between all the subregional countries, efforts made within each country to control epidemics and the spread of disease could be optimized. Countries could pool together their physical, human, material, and financial resources to bring forth a more efficient and coordinated subregional response to outbreaks.

3. Description

RECACER is an operational entity of the Central American countries (Belize, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama) functioning within the political framework of the Central American Economic and Social System (SICA).

Furthermore, RECACER serves as a permanent and dynamic forum for the management of surveillance and disease control standards and/or protocols, the preparation of plans of action, and the exchange of information among the countries in order to coordinate activities for the prevention and control of epidemics.

At first, RECACER integrated the institutions and professionals of epidemiological surveillance and public health laboratories services, and prioritized prevention and control of emerging and reemerging infectious diseases. The electronic platform, INFOCOM, was identified to be the mechanism by which the countries will communicate.

RECACER is composed of two bodies, *National Technical Groups (NTG)* and a *Network Coordinating Committee*, functioning at both national and subregional levels, respectively.

1. *At the national level*, the NTG is composed of representatives of public health and other sector institutions. The coordination of the group and identification of participating institutions will be lead by the Minister of Health. Therefore, the composition of the National Technical Groups is varied from one country to another. Nevertheless, each NTG must have, at least, two public health representatives from epidemiology and laboratory services, respectively.
2. *At the subregional level*, the Network Coordinating Committee is a group of national representatives of public health from the areas epidemiology and laboratory services. These representatives also pertain to their respective NTG. The Executive Secretariat of the Network Coordinating Committee is identified to be a public health representative, either from epidemiology or laboratory services, of the country where RESSCAD is being hosted for that year.

The responsibility of the Network Coordinating Committee is to coordinate, plan, manage, and evaluate RECACER.

The Network Coordinating Committee performs the following functions:

- Coordinate plans, goals, standards, and definition of priorities in the subregion.
- Carry out actions aimed at standardizing quality assurance systems in the networks of public health laboratories.
- Coordinate interventions especially in border areas.
- Promote the training of laboratory and surveillance professionals.
- Identify problems common to the countries which require further studies and research.
- Facilitate the exchange of data and information among countries.
- Establish a calendar of virtual meetings to discuss topics of interest related to the appearance of acute communicable diseases, especially emerging and reemerging infectious diseases.
- Prepare annual plans to be presented to corresponding authorities for their approval and support.
- Identify sources of funding and mobilize financial resources, and prepare plans of implementation to be approved by corresponding authorities.
- Evaluate the performance of the network and its results.
- Prepare progress reports of the network activities in fulfillment of its objectives as well as for public health political bodies, such as COMISCA and RESSCAD.

4. Objective and Expected Results

The main objective of RECACER is to formalize and strengthen cooperative work among the countries in order to monitor, prevent, and control infectious diseases representing threats to the countries of the sub-region.

An operational RECACER will bring the following benefits:

- Effectiveness in the utilization of current physical, human and material resources relating to the prevention, detection, research, diagnosis, and control of emerging and reemerging infectious diseases.
- Prognostication of measures to be taken for the containment of infectious diseases and their associated risks through the use of timely information from other countries.
- Enhancement of horizontal cooperation capacity for the development of national capabilities.
- Improvement in negotiating with other countries for the regulation of the exchange of products, services and food that pose potential public health risk.
- Capacity for the analysis of epidemiologic information on the occurrence, distribution and control of cases and outbreaks, therefore expanding the knowledge base about the epidemiology of specific diseases.

II. Creation of the National Technical Group to Strengthen Prevention and Control of Emerging and Reemerging Communicable Diseases (GTNER)

1. Objective

The objective of the National Technical Groups is to strengthen public health services to respond to infectious diseases epidemics or outbreaks.

2. Description

It is proposed that each National Technical Group be composed of national representatives of participating public health and other sector institutions involved in the prevention and control of acute infectious diseases of epidemic potential. These participating institutions are responsible for:

- Defining intervention priorities.
- Preparing standards and operational guidelines to services.
- Carrying out and supporting field investigation.
- Establishing or carrying out laboratory diagnoses.
- Providing clinical or prophylactic treatment.
- Advising on technical and scientific issues.
- Training, setting priorities and promoting strategies for human resources development.
- Advising on the utilization of available resources.
- Mobilizing extra-budgetary resources.
- Analyzing the situation of emerging diseases in the country.
- Developing actions and mobilizing mass media.

Each National Technical Group will be responsible for the following tasks relating to emerging and reemerging infectious diseases:

- Defining which emerging and reemerging infectious diseases to monitor, according to national situation and international agreements.
- Discussing, proposing, obtaining the approval of authorities, following up, evaluating, and disseminating information on actions related to surveillance, prevention and control of emerging and reemerging diseases.
- Designing annual joint, multi-institutional plans of action, based on the assessment of current situation.
- Reviewing technical and operational guidelines and standards, and proposing necessary adjustments to the different institutions.
- Defining the flow, instruments, and frequency of communication between participating units in the national epidemiological surveillance system.
- Preparing inventories of human and institutional resources.
- Identifying training and research needs and proposing alternative to address them.
- Preparing contingency plans.
- Facilitating interagency coordination.
- Disseminating scientific and technical information.

3. Expected Results

- As a permanent group, the National Technical Group is to coordinate activities of prevention and control of epidemic-prone communicable diseases.
- Assessment of current status of public health services for surveillance and response to epidemic situations.
- Preparation and implementation of a national plan of action to improve the performance of public health system to detect, investigate, and respond to situations generated by infectious diseases (early warning/rapid response system).
- Updating technical and operational guidelines for prevention and control of priority epidemic-prone infectious diseases.