



OFFLU Steering and Executive Committee meeting (by zoom)
1 July 2021

Participants:

Ian Brown, David Swayne, Les Sims, Jiming Chen, Mia Torchetti, Nicola Lewis, Frank Wong, Yanbing Li, Gounalan Pavade, Cristian De Battisti

1. Welcome and Introduction (Ian Brown, SC Chairman)

Ian Brown, the Chairman of the Steering Committee opened the meeting. He welcomed the new Executive Committee Member Dr Yanbing Li (Harbin, China) to the group. A round table introduction of all the members of Steering and Executive Committee was exchanged.

2. Update on OFFLU committee changes (Ian)

The current Steering Committee members are Ian Brown (Chair), David Swayne (Member) and Les Sims (Member) and Dr Jiming Chen (Member).

The Executive Committee consists of Mia Torchetti (Chair), Nicola Lewis, Frank Wong, Yanbing Li and OIE/FAO focal points. Dr Yanbing Li from Harbin, China joined as the new member of the Executive Committee.

3. OFFLU Scientist update (Cristian)

The interview process for selecting a new OFFLU scientist is on way, but it may take some time to complete the full process. In the interim, FAO proposed to hire a consultant to help with the September 2021 VCM activities.

Action: To share the ToR of the OFFLU Scientist to the Committee for information and better prioritize work activities after his/her recruitment (Cristian)

4. OFFLU Executive Committee report (Mia)

Mia Torchetti, the Chairman of the Executive committee invited the leads of technical activities to provide an update from respective item.

Avian influenza technical activity (Frank):

H9N2 nomenclature: The Italy reference lab IZSve which is leading the activity related with the definition of a phylogeny-based classification of H9 viruses has contacted colleagues who were previously involved in the H9 genotyping activities. Due to the covid scenario, there are challenges in getting feedback as many labs are busy with SARSCoV2-related genetic investigations. Justin Bahl who previously worked on this topic agreed to resume the work and collaborate with IZSve to move forward. Meanwhile, IZSve is doing literature review and dataset preparation to set the backbone.

Action: The Committee suggested to involve wider group of experts/laboratories to assist IZSVe in this work. David Suarez from SEPRL also have interest in H9 activity. China Harbin lab accepted to participate for the data set contribution (Frank)

OFFLU proficiency testing: As a follow up action from the OFFLU proficiency testing as discussed at the last meeting, the ACDP, Australia addressed the comments raised in previous meeting and is ready to send the panels for 2021 round in the next months to all labs.

Action: Ensure right panel with geographical representation. An external expert review (by a small group of one or two experts) will be done to review the outcomes of performance as an annex to the report (Frank)

Swine influenza technical activity (Nicola):

The current co-chairs of the group are Dr Gaelle Simon (France) and Dr Janice Zanella (Brasil). A virtual meeting was organized in December 2020 to get swine influenza surveillance updates from different regions. Swine influenza experts from animal and public health attended the meeting to share information (<https://www.offlu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Meeting-summary-final.pdf>). The next call for collection of data to September VCM has been sent out. Initial preliminary analyses of data have identified another four co-circulating clades of 1A viruses and so there is expanding diversity noticed for the swine influenza group to contribute actively.

Equine influenza technical activity (Nicola):

Dr Ann Cullinane is the current chair of this activity. This group shares surveillance data for update of vaccine recommendations on annual basis. This year there were some challenges in generation of data due to covid situation. A virtual meeting is planned for next week and attempts are underway to gather all the genetic and antigenic data to produce a full report for discussion in the meeting.

Action: Follow up equine influenza surveillance panel 2021 meeting (Ann Cullinane and Nicola)

OFFLU- WHO VCM activity (Nicola):

WHO wrote to the OFFLU Secretariat seeking extension of Dr Nicola Lewis's term as OFFLU representative to Vaccine composition meetings. The Committee considered the request by email exchange and agreed for her continuity beyond February 2022 until the next transition.

With the addition of scope of swine influenza data package to VCM, it has raised the profile of OFFLU submissions of animal surveillance information and WHO recognizes the importance of understanding what is going on in the animal populations for better risk assessment. The posting of unredacted full OFFLU report on the website is well received by contributors. Invitation letters for next round of collection of data for September meeting has been sent.

Action: Follow up September 2021 VCM (Nicola and Secretariat)

OFFLU epidemiology technical activity (Cristian):

The experts of this technical activity will contribute to two initiatives in pipeline. One on 'FAO HPAI surveillance guidelines which will be reviewed by selected members of this group. Second for a paper on 'Avian influenza, a continuing threat' which will be published in FAO EMPRESi bulletin.

OFFLU wild bird technical activity (Gounalan): The experts in this group were individually contacted to get their commitment to contribute to this activity and a call was organized with the experts to discuss about the avian influenza events in wild birds.

Action: *The group can develop an OFFLU statement about the wild bird events and the global spread in the context of wild bird migration.*

OFFLU socio-economics technical activity (Gounalan)

Global burden on animal diseases (GBAD) programme which was launched recently will include influenza as a cause in the production systems. This programme will seek out technical and epidemiological support from OFFLU with regards to the attribution of the health loss envelope estimations.

Action: *Follow up with Dr Jonathan Rushton.*

OFFLU network SWOT analysis (Gounalan):

Action: *A questionnaire survey will be prepared and sent to the network members to evaluate the OFFLU network strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats.*

OFFLU cleavage site document:

Action: *Needs to be updated based on latest information.*

5. OFFLU use of VCM data for veterinary health benefit - Assessment of antigenic variants (Les Sims)

Dr Les Sims shared a concept note on molecular and antigenic characteristics of animal influenza viruses for vaccine update that OFFLU can produce annually preferably at about the same time as one of the biannual WHO VCM reports. The aim is to make use of the data collected for WHO VCM. The document will aim at providing information on antigenic variants that warrant attention, perhaps that requires changes in vaccine antigens. And include information from published research even if the information relates to viruses from several years earlier especially if it contains new information. To start with, for avian influenza, subtypes H5, H7 and H9 and any other subtypes for which vaccination is used; for swine influenza H1 and H3 and equine influenza virus subtypes can be covered.

It should be made clear that these are not recommendations to change antigens in vaccines but provided for information especially for strains that appear to be significant antigenic variants. This information may assist countries that are considering use of vaccines banks for emergency vaccination to choose appropriate vaccines/vaccine antigens.

The Committee members exchanged views on this concept note and agreed that it will be a useful activity that OFFLU can consider drafting a plan for providing impartial science evidence that can be used by the global community to improve control. The Committee noted that to continuously implement this activity on timely basis, there is a need for an established expert group and resources including funds to carry out this work.

The Committee concluded that to start with this proposal, a small pilot activity can be initiated by generating a few HI tables from the VCM data to provide scientific information at the level of the antigenic variation as well as genetic variation relative to animal populations.

Action: *To initiate this activity on a pilot basis, develop a concept note for a new technical activity with interested contributors to start the process (Nicola, Les, David). Explore how to secure funding for this activity.*