

# New Approaches for Education and Training in Veterinary Public Health: The SAPUVET Projects

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### ABSTRACT

Continued contact between humans and animals, in combination with the ever-increasing movement of human and animal populations that is one effect of globalization, contributes to the spread of diseases, often with detrimental effects on public health. This has led professionals involved in both animal health and public health to recognize veterinary public health (VPH) as a key area for their activities to address the human-animal interface. Veterinarians, a profession with major involvement in this field, are in need of specific knowledge and skills to prevent and control public-health problems. As a result, VPH must be directly integrated into veterinary educational programs. At present, only few veterinary schools have specific VPH programs; in most institutions, VPH does not feature as a specific subject in either undergraduate or post-graduate curricula. SAPUVET and SAPUVETNET II are network projects supported by the ALFA program of the European Union (EU). Their main objectives are to reach a common understanding between European and Latin American universities in the definition of the areas in which VPH is important in their respective countries, and to design a harmonized training program for veterinarians in VPH, by making use of new technological applications and innovative teaching methodologies. The elaboration of educational material in combination with case studies presenting real-life problems provides a basis to apply the knowledge acquired on VPH. It is envisaged that the material and modules developed during the two projects will be integrated into the veterinary curricula of the participating universities, as well as in other partner organizations.

**Key words:** veterinary public health; veterinary professionals; new teaching methodologies; case studies; harmonized training programs

### INTRODUCTION

In the last several years, important international events such as the emergence of epidemic zoonoses (Influenza A, West Nile virus, Hendra Nipah virus, SARS), natural or human-induced disasters affecting animal populations (hurricanes, earthquakes, inundations), and collateral effects related to animal production (antibiotic resistance, animal welfare) have given rise to an urgent need for veterinary medicine to contribute directly to the field of public health. Since then the discipline of veterinary public health (VPH) has received increased consideration in educational institutions such as veterinary faculties. In some cases, VPH is now introduced as an important tool for the veterinary profession.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, some international organizations have organized a number of events to open up discussions on the role of veterinary professionals in society and their contribution to public health. VPH subjects need to become an integral part of veterinary curricula, and there is an urgent need to harmonize the contents of VPH-related disciplines.

Examples of such events are the expert consultation forums on Future Trends in Veterinary Public Health organized by the WHO in 1999 and on Community Based Veterinary Public Health (VPH) Systems run by the FAO in 2004, as well as the development of some new organizations and bodies involved in VPH, such as the European College of

Veterinary Public Health<sup>1</sup>, and projects and networks such as SAPUVET and SAPUVETNET II,<sup>2</sup> Med-Vet-Net,<sup>3</sup> the Emerging Diseases in a Changing European Environment (EDEN) Project,<sup>4</sup> and the European Consortium for Continuing Education in Advanced Meat Science and Technology (ECCEAMST).<sup>5</sup>

The initial question is, What is VPH? According to the World Health Organisation (WHO),<sup>3, 4</sup> VPH can be defined as "the sum of all contributions to the physical, mental and social well-being of humans through an understanding and application of veterinary science."<sup>5</sup>

According to this definition, we can conclude that veterinarians have an important role in various areas related to VPH, including

- International cooperation in the management of animals in areas affected by disasters
- Humanitarian assistance to countries affected by wars where animal populations are a survival resource for humans
- Improvement of animal movement and management strategies to prevent the emergence of diseases and their spread around the world
- The promotion of animal welfare as a way to improve food-production methods and respond to consumer demands