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**LABORATORY SERVICES IN THE PROVISION
OF QUALITY HEALTH CARE**

Round Table 1

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BACKGROUND

1. The quality of health care as defined by World Health Organization is “proper performance (according to standards) of interventions that are known to be safe, that are affordable to the society in question and that have the ability to produce an impact on mortality, morbidity, disability and malnutrition.”¹ However, the effectiveness of interventions depend on the availability of laboratory services capable of carrying out proper diagnoses needed for appropriate case management. Resolutions AFR/RC44/R15,² AFR/RC45/R3³ and AFR/RC48/R2⁴ reaffirm this decisive role of health laboratories.

2. Under the health sector reforms, efforts were evidently made in the region to adopt effective health development strategies and to decentralize health services. In this respect, mention can be made of the operationalization of districts as part of the three-phase health development scenario, the Bamako Initiative, etc. Although laboratory services have never been ranked on the same level of priority as specialized programmes such as the programmes on tuberculosis and leprosy control, they were nonetheless included in the reforms. In spite of that effort, the performance of laboratory services still leave much to be desired in the African Region, a situation resulting from the constraints discussed below.

3. In general, laboratory staff are hardly motivated, inadequate in numerical terms and need to be strengthened. Not only are laboratory equipment unsuitable and heterogeneous but, more importantly, 50-70% of them are in malfunction for lack of maintenance. Supply of reagents is very erratic, contributing largely to the weakness of laboratory services. Norms and rules of technical procedures for activity monitoring are lacking in most of the countries. Many small laboratories operate without supervision. The quality of service for a given test varies from one laboratory to another, resulting in disparities even within a given country.

4. Laboratories are seldom perceived as an integral part of the national health policy, and deserving some autonomy for its development. No specific budget allocations are made to laboratories which therefore operate only with the resources allocated to the programmes they support. This dependence and lack of financial autonomy tend to limit the capacity of laboratories and account for their generally heterogeneous and poor performance.

¹ Montoya-Aguillar/Roemer – Quality assessment and assurance for primary health care, WHO, 1985.

² Final report of the 44th session of the Regional Committee, AFR/RC44/R15: Selection and development of health technologies at district level, September, 1994, p.20

³ Final report of the 45th session of the Regional Committee, AFR/RC45/R3: Strategies for improving the quality of care in health care institutions in the African Region.,: September 1995, p.7.

⁴ Final report of the 48th session of the Regional Committee, AFR/RC48/R2: Integrated epidemiological surveillance of diseases: Regional strategy for communicable diseases, September 1998, p.5.

FRAMEWORK FOR APPROPRIATE RESPONSE

5. Laboratory services means the totality of health laboratories established in a given country. They comprise the national public health laboratory in charge of coordinating activities carried out nationwide, specialized laboratories (attached to specific programmes such as programmes on the control of tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malaria, or attached to training institutions) and biomedical test laboratories including health district laboratories. All these categories of laboratories facilitate health decision making. However, quality of care depends primarily on biomedical test laboratories.

6. Within the laboratory, the reliability of tests, which determines the accuracy of diagnosis and helps improve the quality of care, depends on adherence to the working conditions and technical procedures in force. This means assignment of adequate number of technical staff to posts matched to their capacity, systematic adherence to quality control procedures in routine day-to-day manipulations, adherence to all norms at every stage of manipulation until delivery of the final product, etc. Laboratories should also operate within the laid-down external quality control arrangements so that they can be given an objective opinion of their performance.

7. At the State level, the development and implementation of an actual policy on laboratories will ensure smooth development of activities in the laboratory sector, since there would then be:

- an appropriate institutional framework consisting of the central directorate of laboratories or a similar central structure, responsible for policy design and strategic orientation and given support by two advisory bodies namely: the technical committee on equipment (or an equivalent structure) and the national quality control board;
- a hierarchical implementation framework consisting of the national network of laboratories and headed by the national reference laboratory in charge of coordinating activities carried out by the network in accordance with national procedural norms.

8. Given the large diversity characteristic of laboratories in countries of the region as regards their level of development and the constraints that they face, one can envisage several options and several sequences of intervention for the implementation of the framework. It is therefore incumbent upon each country to determine the sequential order of its interventions depending on the specific situation of the country's laboratory services. A country may, for example:

- adopt a systematic approach, first by conducting a situation analysis before proceeding gradually to address the inadequacies identified in the framework by devoting to it the necessary resources or;
- choose to strengthen the coordination of activities by setting up a national network, designating a national reference laboratory, promoting the norms and rules of technical procedures throughout the network and allocating sufficient resources.

9. Whatever the choice made by the country, in the long term, if there is regular monitoring of activities, it will be absolutely necessary to establish superior bodies to solve problems that may occur, for example, in the application of norms, should such problems be beyond the purview of the executing agency. Consequently, the implementation of activities may warrant the establishment of institutional organs to address weaknesses identified and thereby ensure effective implementation of the related framework.

CHALLENGES

10. The African Region has the highest burden of disease worldwide, due mainly to HIV/AIDS, malaria, diarrhea diseases and acute respiratory infections. To effectively control these diseases, diagnose noncommunicable diseases and ensure biological follow-up of patients, laboratory services should be provided with functional equipment and adequate expertise. Challenges to be met in this regard are:

- clarification of the functions of laboratory services in an official document which defines the relevant policy with regard to laboratories and forms an integral part of the national health policy;
- establishment of an appropriate framework for proper functioning of laboratories;
- allocation of sufficient resources to laboratories for the development of laboratory activities.

DISCUSSION POINTS

11. In the light of the foregoing situation analysis, what are the concrete actions to be taken to establish functional and efficient laboratory services at all levels of the health pyramid?

12. If lack of organization and regulation is a major impediment to the development of laboratory services, what are the measures that should be taken to create an institutional environment conducive to the development of the laboratory sector?

13. What are the types of structure to be established to ensure better coordination of laboratory activities at the national level?

14. Inadequacy of human resources is a real problem in the health services especially in the laboratory sector. Considering that staff training is not always included among top priorities and that salaries are unattractive, what viable actions should be adopted, as a matter of urgency, in order to provide laboratory services with sufficient numbers of competent staff?

15. One of the consequences of the lack of a directorate of laboratories in the ministry of health in the majority of countries is that no specific budget is allocated for the operation of laboratories. Even when a budget line is assigned to laboratories, the funds thus allocated are

insufficient. Against this background, what are the mechanisms that can be put in place to ensure the sustainability and smooth functioning of laboratory services?

16. Inappropriateness and heterogeneity of equipment and lack of equipment maintenance programmes are having a negative impact on the performance of laboratories. In this respect, what are the measures that Member States should take, individually or collectively, to solve these problems?

17. The quality of laboratory reagents often varies from one laboratory to the other even within a given country, and reagent supply is, sometimes, irregular. What are the solutions to be proposed to avoid importation of poor-quality and/or expired reagents, while preventing stock-outs, all of which are prejudicial to the proper functioning of laboratory services?

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

18. The fifty-third session of the Regional Committee expects the round table discussions to yield the following outcomes:

- (a) orientations for putting in place a laboratory policy which would be an integral part of the national health policy;
- (b) institutional framework for activity implementation which ensures the systematization and standardization needed to enhance the quality of laboratory tests and the performance of laboratory services;
- (c) agreement on mechanisms for financing laboratory activities.