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WHO REGIONAL SMALLPOX LABORATORY
DIAGNOSTIC CENTRES

by

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The value of laboratory diagnosis of smallpox and the necessity of getting prompt results, in surveillance mechanism in relation to the global smallpox eradication programme has been discussed previously.

To cope with this important aspect of the programme, the establishment of a network of diagnostic facilities has been given enough importance and is being planned for initiation in this Region.

Unfortunately, not all countries are able to initiate such activities, simply because of shortage or lack of skilled technical personnel, and of proper equipment.

However, for those countries where at all possible, steps have been taken already towards this goal. Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, Syria and the Sudan, so far have taken steps towards progress in this matter.

Last year, laboratory technicians from these countries attended a Training Course of about 5 months duration, in Virology in general, and in smallpox laboratory diagnosis in particular. The Course, sponsored by WHO, was held at the Virus Research Centre, Agouza, Cairo, a follow-up visit by experts to the participating countries is envisaged and it is also proposed to award fellowships in due course where indicated. A similar course will be held again in 1971 in the same site.

Advisory assistance, as well as the necessary supplies and equipment will be made available, where needed, by WHO, subject to budgetary provisions.

However, as this will only solve the problems of a few individual countries, the establishment of regional reference laboratories for the diagnosis of smallpox is envisaged in the near future.

The tasks of these reference laboratories will be :

1. to perform necessary tests on specimens received from countries of the Region.
2. to perform final confirmation tests in case national laboratories cannot cope.
3. to supply unknown specimens to national laboratories to check their proficiency.
4. to arrange for the training of new technicians for national laboratories, and to arrange for follow-up visits in an advisory capacity.

Negotiations are already under process for the establishment of three smallpox reference laboratories as follows :

- Dacca : Institute of Public Health
- Teheran : Pasteur Institute (Central Reference Laboratory)
- Cairo : Virus Research Centre, Agouza

The choice of the above three laboratories did not depend on existing facilities only, but also on their favourable location, and their accessibility.

The Government of Pakistan, as well as the authorities concerned, have already confirmed their agreement to using the existing facilities here in Dacca, for the establishment of a reference laboratory.

Preliminary discussions with the responsible officials in charge of Teheran and Cairo Laboratories have already ensured their willingness to the establishment of reference laboratories, but Government confirmation in both cases is still awaited.

If this materialized, in the beginning of next year, you will be officially informed of the facilities available in respect of reference laboratories, in this Region. Then, specimens could be sent directly to the laboratories for diagnosis purposes.

Special laboratory kits for easy and safe collection and despatch of suspected material have been prepared, according to rules and conventions established by international postal agreement. These kits will be made available to the countries of the Region for this purpose.