# Healthy Collaboration

By A. VENKATA NARAYANA

When Maharashtra was battling bird flu in February, the Health and Human Services office of the U.S. Embassy worked closely with Indian health experts to identify the disease so that measures could be taken to keep it from spreading. Fast action is a principal factor in keeping disease outbreaks from turning into epidemics, and a quick response is the aim of U.S.-India cooperation in preventing, controlling and eliminating disease.

Within two weeks of poultry becoming ill in Maharashtra, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a specialist agency of the embassy's health office, had "supplied the diagnostic reagents to the National Institute of Virology in Pune for identification of the bird flu virus in human samples," says U.S. Embassy Health Attache Dr. Altaf A. Lal. "That demonstrates how quickly we were able to move the new technology of reagents into India and how quickly India was able to use that technology."

The Centers for Disease Control is continuing to provide technical support to Indian laboratories and other institutions to help monitor and identify any new cases of avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu. Since the Maharashtra outbreak, the Embassy's health office has provided a $2 million fund to Indian health institutions to conduct research and produce a vaccine for bird flu, and has brought an American laboratory expert and an epidemiologist to India. The U.S. Embassy health experts are working with the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Indian Council of Medical Research to prevent the bird flu pandemic from recurring in India.

For four decades the Embassy's health office has been working with Indian experts on medical research, public health and disease control, prevention and elimination. In addition to the Centers for Disease Control, other agencies of the Health and Human Services office—the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration—have broadened the scope of their joint activities with Indian health institutes and organizations. As a result of such cooperation, small pox and guinea worm, which were prevalent in the 1960s and '70s, were eradicated from India, says Lal.

Another success story is the near eradication of polio in India. The Indian government, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Health and Human Services office fought as a team to reduce the number of polio cases from more than 40,000 a decade ago to an estimated 40 now. "Because of the government's emphasis on eradicating the disease, we offer advice on the scientific policy and standard guidelines. A huge effort is needed to ensure that the immunization is administered to eliminate the crippling disease," says Subhash Sulanke, regional adviser for communicable disease surveillance and response at the World Health Organization in New Delhi. Four Centers for Disease Control officials are working full-time in India on polio eradication, and every month another two to three technical consultants come from the agency's Atlanta, Georgia, headquarters. "We are within reach of eradicating polio. There were 40-odd cases reported, predominantly in some areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. With a proper immunization program and support from the global community, polio can be taken out of the country," says Lal. U.S. and Indian health experts had predicted polio would be eliminated in India by the end of 2004, but the deadline was not met. As long as there are any cases at all, the disease can erupt and spread again, so immunization in every corner of the country, and in neighboring countries, is essential.

## Examples of collaboration

- The National Institutes of Health is providing funding to more than 125 research projects in India, up from zero in 1990. The projects cover HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and rotavirus. The funding supports an aggressive campaign to treat tuberculosis cases through DOTS (direct observation treatment strategy), carried out by the International Center for Excellence in Tuberculosis Research in Chennai. TB cases are rising because of HIV as both go together. Six Health and Human Services consultants have been working in India on HIV/AIDS in the laboratory and on the prevention and treatment side.
- The Health and Human Services office provides support to create schools of public health in India. In March, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh launched a foundation for public health to establish schools whose graduates would become the hands and minds of disease control.
- Through workshops on medical science, public health and technology transfer, Indian professionals are trained in the latest techniques of maternal and child health, vaccine development and clinical research, through Health and Human Services funding. The aid includes grants for Indian health investigators to work with American counterparts.

Nearly 400 American health professionals come to India each year and an equal number of Indian experts go to U.S. laboratories, says Lal. "They are the ambassadors of medical research. They investigate diseases together, develop scientific knowledge together, fighting, controlling, preventing disease together." □