

External Quality Assessment Programme in Africa

In July 2002, the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) of South Africa launched the External Quality Assessment (EQA) Programme for national laboratories of Africa. The programme was established by the WHO Department of Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response (CSR) in Lyon, France for laboratory and epidemiology capacity development. The EQA programme aims to help participating laboratories assess their capabilities and guides WHO AFRO in developing activities targeted to address the laboratories' needs.

The EQA programme is organized by the NHLS, with participation from 38 testing laboratories in 29 African countries and nine WHO worldwide collaborating laboratories. The testing laboratories are either national public health referral laboratories or laboratories that are part of the *Haemophilus influenzae* Pediatric Bacterial Meningitis Surveillance Network (Hib PBM) for their country. The collaborating laboratories provide technical advice to NHLS in their specialty areas.

The programme focuses on standard laboratory confirmation of three

epidemic-prone disease areas: bacterial diarrheal diseases, bacterial meningitis, and plague. NHLS develops and distributes surveys containing simulated clinical specimens and instruction packets to the testing and collaborating laboratories. The surveys are designed to assess laboratory confirmation abilities including antimicrobial susceptibility, and the activities that come before and after testing, such as processing, communication, and documentation.

The EQA programme completed its first year, with three shipments of surveys: in July and October 2002, and in January 2003. NHLS has analyzed the results of the

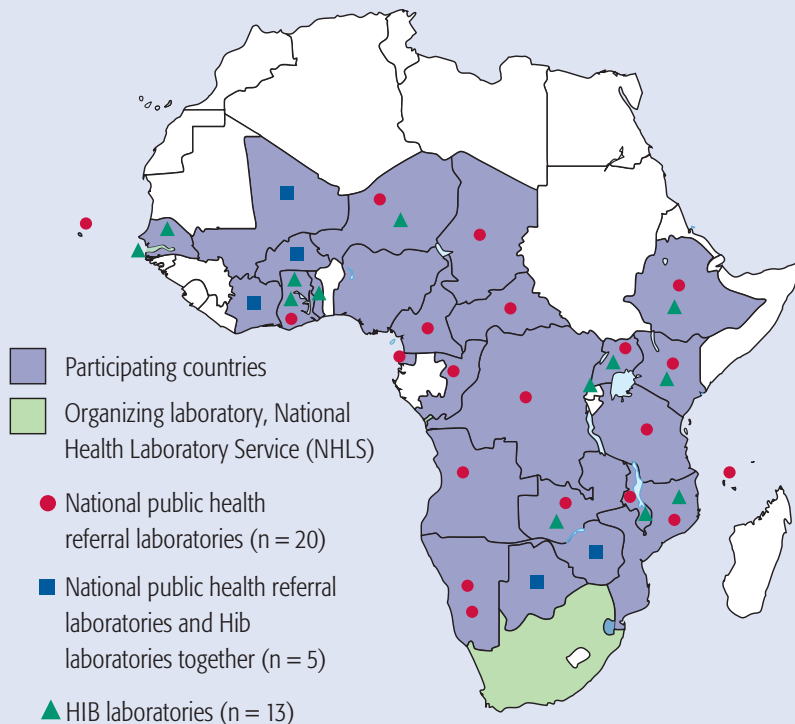
first two shipments and is now completing analysis of the final one. WHO AFRO will establish a regional EQA advisory group to review the data and make recommendations.

Initially, the EQA programme will focus on maintaining the participation of laboratories and serve as an educational tool. Next year, WHO AFRO plans to expand participation by 10 or more national laboratories in the African region. The EQA programme in Africa could serve as a model for developing similar programs in other WHO regions in the future.

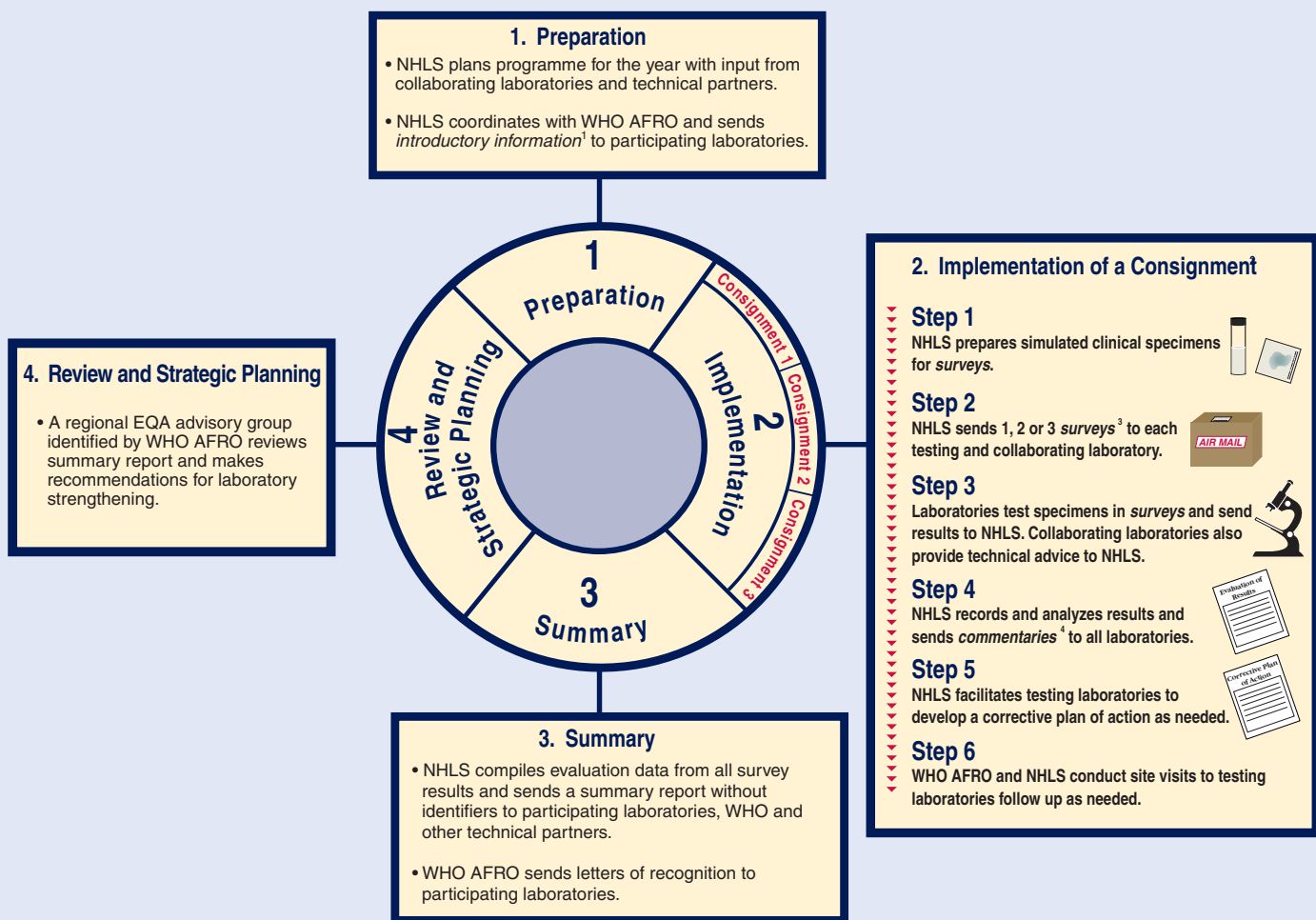
The WHO headquarters and CSR, Lyon, along with the CDC provide technical support to NHLS. The programme is sponsored by WHO CSR, Lyon with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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Countries Participating in External Quality Assessment (EQA) Programme July 2002 - January 2003



External Quality Assessment (EQA) Programme for the National Laboratories of Africa



¹ *Introductory information* includes: 1) purpose of the EQA programme, 2) roles and responsibilities of organizing and participating laboratories, 3) criteria used to assess survey results, 4) criteria for recognition of laboratory participation and good performance, and 5) contact information for organizing laboratory.

² A *consignment* is a shipment of surveys to testing and collaborating laboratories

³ A *survey* contains simulated clinical specimens representing a bacterial diarrheal disease or bacterial meningitis or plague. This survey also contains instructions and a response form.

Instructions include: 1) description of the specimens and handling procedures, 2) a report form with instructions and survey closing date, and 3) clinical details and technical information about specimens.

⁴ A *commentary* contains an evaluation of the results submitted by the testing laboratory and a summary of results of all laboratories for that survey. It also contains background information about the specimens and tests expected for laboratory confirmation.