Statement by the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) on the Zika virus and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic and Paralympic Games

FACTS AND CONCERNS

• There are outbreaks of Zika in more than 50 countries and territories, particularly in the Americas. Although the illness caused by the Zika virus is usually mild, the infection during pregnancy can cause the serious birth defect microcephaly, as well as other severe fetal brain defects and Guillain-Barré syndrome. For this reason the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Zika virus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

• The first confirmed Zika virus infection in the Americas was detected in Brazil and caused the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to issue an alert in May 2015. There are 58 countries and territories which to date report continuing transmission of Zika. The virus is transmitted to people primarily through the bite of an infected Aedes species mosquito. However, there are other modes of transmission: a pregnant woman already infected with the Zika virus can pass the virus to her fetus during the pregnancy or around the time of birth; an infected man can spread the virus to his sex partners; and the virus can be transmitted through blood transfusion.

• Present reports indicate that the Zika virus will probably continue to spread. The control of the outbreak in Brazil, based mainly on the control of the vector (Aedes mosquito) with pesticides, is revealing several difficulties. Poor urban infrastructure and environmental sanitation favors mosquito breeding.

• The mosquito that carries the Zika virus, Aedes aegypti, is found in over 100 countries worldwide, meaning that Zika potentially could be transmitted in all those countries. The virus has spread to 39 countries since the first cases were detected in Brazil.

• Brazil is the host country for the 2016 Olympics. The Olympics will bring hundreds of thousands of travelers to the country and shortly thereafter, return them to their home countries. Almost certainly some of those travelers will have become infected while in Brazil. The precaution principle compels us to adopt preventive measures to avoid negative effects on public health.

• The WHO/PAHO issued a statement on 12 May 2016 in order to prevent transmission of the Zika virus to athletes and visitors to Rio de Janeiro and other areas of Brazil where the Zika virus is circulating. The main recommendations are: pregnant women should not travel to
areas with ongoing Zika virus transmission and this includes Rio de Janeiro; and, travellers and athletes should receive counselling on how to prevent exposure to the virus.

**POSITION**

The WFPHA

- endorses the WHO/PAHO’s statement on Zika virus and its recommendations, calling on the WHO and the IOC to be forthright publicly about the risks of exposure to the Zika virus for the hundreds of thousands of athletes and spectators who will attend the Olympic and ParaOlympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in August and September. Furthermore, the WFPHA encourages the International Olympic Committee to adopt these measures and to be committed with their active dissemination and implementation though all national Olympics Committees.

- urges the Brazil Government, and all countries at risk, to apply enough resources for the prevention of the Zika virus. We demand that special attention be paid to social and sanitary conditions because a strategy based only on pesticides for vector control could be insufficient. We stress the need to tackle social and physical environmental conditions that favor the spread of the virus. Unless determined action is implemented to improve urban infrastructure and sanitation, the control of the epidemic will fail.

- urges all countries affected by Zika to provide the necessary health and social services for treatment and support of children born with birth defects.

- advocates for greater emphasis on inequalities related to this epidemic. Greater attention should be paid to vulnerable populations particularly in the poorer outskirts of cities.

- invites public health associations to collaborate with governments, sports institutions and other organizations to communicate the recommendations for the preventive of Zika and to collaborate in their implementation.