



The Agriculture and Environment Committee  
Hendra Virus Vaccine Inquiry  
c/- Mr Rob Hansen  
Parliament House  
Brisbane, Qld, 4000

## **SUBMISSION TO QUEENSLAND PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY INTO THE HENDRA VIRUS VACCINE AND ITS USE BY VETERINARY SURGEONS IN QUEENSLAND**

My name is Dr Ian Fulton and I am a partner in the Ballarat Veterinary Practice in Victoria where we run a large referral equine hospital and ambulatory horse veterinary service. While our clinic and our customers do not reside in the endemic zones of Queensland and Northern New South Wales where Hendra Virus has been diagnosed in horses, our practice has had to develop a Hendra Virus Policy. We have vaccinated over 700 local horses for clients who travel to horse shows interstate where the potential to mingle with horses from the endemic zone exists. Our business also services a large number of thoroughbred and standardbred racing stables in the district that frequently have horses from the endemic zones arriving at their stables.

Our hospital is one of the largest referral centres for veterinarians to send sick and injured animals to from all over the State of Victoria. This point becomes relevant when horses from Queensland or Northern New South Wales attend a variety of horse related events in Victoria such as Three Day Events at the Werribee Equestrian Centre, Polocrosse events which are held locally in Ballarat and numerous thoroughbred and standardbred race meetings all over Victoria which at certain times of the year are frequented with horses from Queensland and Northern New South Wales.

We are also confronted with having large racing stables in our district sending horses north to Queensland for racing purposes especially in the carnivals at the Gold Coast. This creates a significant potential risk factor for our practice that if a local horse travels to Queensland to undertake racing duties and then returns within a short period of time and develops illness on return to Victoria, we have to invoke our practice policy whereby we will not allow this horse to enter our hospital and whilst we will visit the horse at its residence with appropriate personal protective equipment, we cannot undertake intensive treatment until an exclusion test has been performed.

So while we reside in Victoria and we are not in the centre of a region where Hendra Virus can be a daily concern for veterinarians, it has a significant impact on the way we manage risk at our referral hospital and for our ambulatory veterinarians. **Our practice has administered over 700 doses of Hendra Virus vaccine to our local clients over the last three years. To this date we have not had a significant reaction reported by any of our clients following the first or repeat doses of Hendra vaccine.**

The development of our policy has been based on risk analysis. This risk analysis if applied to horses within the Queensland and Northern New South Wales area makes it an untenable situation for veterinarians to be expected to travel and attend sick horses that could be suffering from Hendra Virus. There is a readily available safe and effective vaccine to prevent this disease from occurring and the Queensland Government through Biosecurity Queensland and Work Health and Safety Queensland both state emphatically that “the vaccine is the single most effective way of reducing the risk of Hendra Virus infection in horses and provides a work health and safety and public health benefit”. The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) have registered this vaccine as a safe and effective method of preventing Hendra Virus disease in horses. This registration required intensive testing and scrutiny of results prior to being awarded. Given the confidence a high-level government authority has imposed upon this vaccine by full registration, as veterinarians we are 100% confident with the use of this vaccine within our practice. We see no reason why it should not be extended into other equine industries where mixing of horses and people takes place and exposure to excretions from the respiratory tract and oral tract of horses is a high risk. These circumstances occur at a racetrack on a daily basis and regularly at other numerous equine events such as polocrosse and three day event competitions.

I am of the firm belief that if a horse from Queensland or Northern New South Wales arrives at an official racing or equine competition and becomes ill and is ultimately diagnosed with Hendra Virus, the risk of prosecution of event organisers (in the case of racing that would be Racing Queensland) is extremely high. All event organisers and racing authorities have been put on notice for over three years now of the possible risk of spread of Hendra from an infected horse to humans due to close interaction that occurs at these events. Government departments (BQ and WHSQ) state that vaccination is the most effective way to control Hendra Virus, therefore it seems to me that failure of horse industry groups to insist upon vaccination of horses attending their events would be seen as negligence in the event of a virus incident.

Transport of horses from Queensland to Victoria, especially in the racing industry is extremely common especially after yearling sales when large numbers of horses have mixed in close proximity to each other in areas where the Hendra Virus is known to exist. Arrival of these horses in Victoria after long float trips can frequently result in the horses showing depression and even high temperatures and illness and we have seen several of these horses over the years. Currently at our hospital we have had four horses arrive in the past two years on transport company trucks that are ill and have originated from the Queensland endemic zones.

Fortunately exclusion tests have been performed and all of these cases were negative but these have resulted in the formation of our policy where we will now not allow these horses to come to our hospital for intensive medical treatment, which is often required to save their lives. This Policy without doubt, has been developed because of risk analysis and with the prosecutions of three veterinarians in Queensland at the forefront of our minds.

As a practice owner, it is very difficult for me to expect my employed veterinarians to attend horses from the endemic zones of Queensland that are unvaccinated and sick for fear of contracting the disease. Our employed veterinarians when handling and processing the samples associated with these horses have a mandate to use personal protective equipment within our clinic however there is still intense concern and worry. All of this concern, fear and stress could be easily resolved if horses had been vaccinated with the Hendra Virus vaccine.

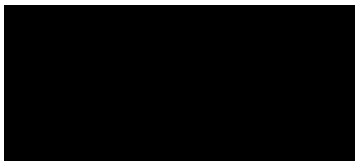
As professional veterinary surgeons when we are treating horses whether at our own hospital or on a person's property, the workplace is our jurisdiction. For an owner to elect not to vaccinate the horse and not provide a safe workplace for our veterinarians and nurses to attend these horses is negligence in my opinion by the owner. The proposed adverse reactions that some people have put forward on social media has been the main reason why vaccination is not being undertaken by individuals but they also quote that the cost of the vaccine is also prohibitive to large scale uptake. To keep this in perspective, it is important to know that the expenditure of individuals and larger organisations such as trainers and breeding farms, on transport of horses, feeding of horses, shoeing of horses and especially in the pleasure horse group, purchasing of large amounts of equipment such as saddles and riding gear which in many cases amounts to thousands of dollars. In Queensland 92% of horse owners spend more than \$4,000 per year on their horses and 53%

over \$10,000. For these people to claim that the expenditure of twice a year of approximately \$100 each time to be too expensive to ensure the health and safety of their horse, themselves and veterinarians attending ill and sick animals is a very weak argument. Currently exclusion testing for Hendra Virus is subsidised heavily by the Queensland government. If this subsidy was removed and owners were expected to pay for exclusion testing themselves, this expense would be far greater than the annual vaccination costs.

In closing, it is my experience both in my own practice here in Victoria and through wide consultation with many veterinarians throughout Northern New South Wales and Queensland, that the reaction to Hendra Virus vaccines is extremely low and does not result in serious illness associated with the horses. Without wider uptake of the Hendra vaccine there will no doubt be more cases where horses die and increased risk of exposure for not only veterinarians but also children and horse handlers associated with these ill horses. The welfare of the horse should be the primary objective for all horse owners and veterinarians. The use of the Hendra Virus vaccine achieves the best welfare outcome for all horses that may become exposed to the Hendra Virus. Event organisers whether they be for small volunteer groups or for large industry groups such as thoroughbred racing and harness racing, should be free to make decisions regarding risk management of the events. They should be able to run events and mandate vaccination of horses at these events without fear of repercussions from a minority of people that for a variety of reasons see fit to undermine the Hendra Virus vaccine. This vaccine is one of the most important vaccines developed in recent times in Australia for the protection of both horses, horse owners and veterinarians.

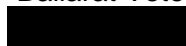
I urge the enquiry to not only find that the Hendra Virus vaccine is safe and effective with minimal side effects but also to encourage all event organisers to consider mandating vaccination where there are gatherings of large numbers of horses in close proximity that occur on an almost daily basis throughout Queensland and Northern New South Wales.

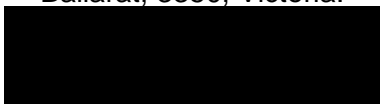
Yours sincerely,



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