

To:
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Agriculture and Environment Committee
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From:
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To the Parliamentary Committee on Hendra virus (HeV) Equivacc vaccine and its use by veterinary surgeons in Queensland.

Reasons for submitting to the committee:

Please bear with me, this is something I have never done before and was very hesitant that I would not write it 'properly or appropriately'.

I have been a horse owner & breeder for many years, (having owned horses since I was 5 and now being 66 year of age) riding my horses in Endurance competition during many of those years.

I have also been a member of the Arabian Horse Society of Australia during those years, along with other various other disciplines and societies.

At the current time I have 7 horses of my own and manage another 4 that are family member's competition horses. The current policy of "No vaccination – No treatment" being implemented by Veterinarians in Queensland is causing me great concern for my horses welfare in case of emergency and standard treatments. It is also impacting on participation in Endurance Riding events as vets are holding organising ride committees to ransom saying they intend to implement a policy of not attending Endurance Rides unless the ride is a 'vaccinated horses only' ride. This is also happening with other disciplines and is disenfranchising many horse owners and riders.

1. As a horse owner, I am not anti-vaccination by any means, my horses are routinely vaccinated for Tetanus & Strangles, my concern is that a percentage of horses are not suitable to be vaccinated with the HeV vaccine as per Zoetis labelling, especially EVERY SIX MONTHS. Aged and immune compromised, with other ailments – Cushing's – laminitis's to name a few. It seems that vets are not always taking the labelling restrictions into consideration in the push to 'vaccinate at all costs'. I am very hesitant to vaccinate my foals, aged horse and broodmares. We also have a competition horse that has had a compromised immune system and our vet said he could not even have the Tetanus/Strangles booster. He certainly COULD NOT be given the HeV vaccination in that case.

The number of reactions experienced (and shared) by horse owners that veterinarians say are not related to the vaccination cannot be dismissed out of hand. The committee will be aware of those who feel the vaccine has adversely affected their horses' long term but their concerns were dismissed. The vaccine should not be treated as a 'cash cow' for veterinary practices. Agreeing to come and treat an unvaccinated horse so long as it can be vaccinated immediately, when this would not provide a veterinarian any protection, is not sound practice and smacks of coercion for commercial gain.

This vaccine was rushed through in a very short space of time compared to other established vaccines and leaves a lot to be desired in the long term testing of results and problems arising for the vaccination.

For all of the above reasons I am extremely hesitant to vaccinate at this time. The vaccine needs much more research, done by an independent body, not commercially involved with the product. Long term repeat vaccination reactions need to be taken into account as does the necessity for repetitive vaccination.

Guidelines/Procedures to attend Non Vaccinated Horses

2. As a horse owner on the coast of S.E Qld I have taken every opportunity to become informed of best management practices with regard to my horses and property. I have a PPE kit (not as good as vets as there is no subsidy for the ordinary person!) and would always observe before touching a horse displaying abnormal symptoms, or that is injured. I take care that feed buckets and water containers are not left out in the open, have no fruit trees and am eliminating other trees that my attract bats. I think the majority of horse owners in "bat" areas are now very aware of 'best practices' in this regard. Our horses are part of our lives and family in many cases, so their welfare is a priority.

The government guidelines I have read to date, do not seem erroneous on veterinarians if Hendra is genuinely suspected. The wearing of PPE in that scenario would be the most sensible precaution, **especially as it has not been definitively been proven that a vaccinated horse cannot infect people or other horses.** Veterinarians in general seem to feel that it is easier to depend on a new vaccine doing its job than to take appropriate precautions even though they are recommended on the relevant government sites even if the horse is vaccinated. What we here is that it is too hot to wear, or it will scare the horses.....

3. One of my local veterinary practices. Maleny Veterinary Services, sent me a letter with their Hendra Policy saying 'they would no longer offer veterinary service to horses that are not vaccinated against Hendra Virus'. This letter indicates that it is because of Biosecurity Queensland. The same information is available on their FaceBook page dated 7th March 16. I have also been advised verbally by another veterinarian that I use, that he will very shortly have to instigate the same policy due to Qld Workplace Health and Safety prosecuting some vets. I know from other horse owners in my area that they are having the same response from their veterinarians also. I find this stance by veterinarians not reasoned as I have extensively read Qld WPH&S literature, the available Queensland Government articles and directives on the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries site and Queensland Government Biosecurity guidelines available at the moment. Nowhere can I see where it says a veterinarian cannot treat a horse if it is not vaccinated. Am I missing something?
4. The ramifications of not being able to get a vet to attend your unvaccinated horse are that many horse owners will try to deal with the problem themselves. Whilst many horse owners are extremely aware of the risks of Hendra, and vigilant about protecting themselves and others from any possible risk, there are bound to be some who don't know or understand, perhaps the parent of a horse owning child. A horse badly cut in an obvious accident for example, should not be ruled out of professional help or the owner will clean, bandage etc themselves to the best of their ability, but not always able to provide the best treatment.
5. When a horse is left unattended by a veterinarian for say colic, the owners will attempt whatever they can to help that horse. If a veterinarian does attend (and many just won't come) and does an exclusion test sample, but won't put pain relief into the horse, the horse will most probably be dead before the exclusion results are back. **THIS ALSO IS AN ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUE.**

6. If, due to the Qld WPH&S regulations, veterinarians won't treat a horse in dire need, the Queensland government needs to provide someone who will come and euthanize the horse at the owners' request. This section on the Queensland Government website seems to indicate this. "Under the Queensland Animal Welfare Law for Veterinarians :
7. Veterinarians' duty-of-care responsibilities Animal welfare law for veterinarians Euthanasing animals While the Act allows you, as a vet, to euthanase animals, it does not give you the automatic right to do this. Under the Act, inspectors and the police do have the power, under certain conditions, to destroy an animal if they believe it would be cruel to keep it alive"

It seems that veterinarians who refuse to attend an unvaccinated horse at all, are avoiding the issue 'duty of care' as per the Queensland Government Animal Welfare guidelines.

8. Ramifications of refusal to attend or treat by a veterinarian.

The alternative that is presenting itself to many horse owners is to apply for a gun license and then purchase a firearm that is suitable to shoot a horse. This is the alternative I am now faced with. Luckily I was brought up on a farming property where we were all taught to use firearms and on occasion destroy stock. Having a licensed firearm on my property would not be my first choice but there may be no alternative once a license is obtained. I am sure there will be a number of other horse owners who will also see this as the only alternative they have. Better to shoot the horse than leave it in agony with no prospect of veterinary treatment.

9. WHY ARE THOROUGHBRED RACE HORSES being attended by veterinarians without vaccination? There is NO EQUALITY of care when this happens.

10. Economic Impact on the Equine Industry from the No Vac – No Treat Policy.

The horse industry generates an enormous amount of income across all sectors of commerce in Queensland. Feed stores, tack stores, float building and sales companies, fencing contractors, shed and stable suppliers and erectors, equine dentists, chiropractors, massage therapy, farriers, adjustment facilities, horse training facilities, coaches, horse riding schools and trekking businesses. The income relating to travel by horse enthusiasts fuel, tyres, petrol, food, accommodation in some cases, would all be minimized. Then there are the horse sporting clubs and associations who will have reduced memberships and revenue. To name a few: Eventing, Showjumping, Rodeo, Cutting, Endurance Riding, CTR, Pony Clubs, Campdrafting, Cutting, Team Penning. Plus the Regional Agricultural Shows and Metropolitan Shows.

To each of these events not only the competitor attends, but support crew and family. For many businesses and families with multiple horses (and that tends to happen with horse riding families) the additional cost of Hendra Vaccination EVERY 6 MONTHS would be unnecessary in many cases due to location (but still could not attend an event with an unvaccinated horse in a 'Hendra' area). Even in those areas not defined as 'Hendra' vets may still decline to attend a non vaccinated horse due to the Australian Veterinarians Association policy.

Breeding studs and commercial horse enterprises who do not wish to vaccinate, or will have no sale outlet for vaccinated horses, will have little option but to relocate to another state. The flow on economic loss to Queensland could be considerable across the spectrum of horse related business. Horse businesses who aim at overseas horse sales, generate a large amount of income in Queensland.

Moving to another state is an option that I also will have to consider, along with my grown up children and their families, if there is not some rationale outcome to this inquiry. Friends in the same position are also considering that this may be necessary.

Why have veterinarians taken this No Vac – No Treat Stance?

- 11. Nothing** has changed in our area, there have been no recent outbreaks of Hendra, no one has contracted the virus, no vets have contracted the virus. Why the sudden change in policy by veterinarians to suddenly refusing to treat non-vaccinated horses? It seems that this drive is from the overseeing Veterinary governing body. We see information that it is NOT the insurance companies (professional indemnity etc?). Reading the many pages of information and guidelines on the Queensland Government websites (QWPH&S, Biosecurity Qld, Agriculture and Fisheries) **there seems to be no direction not to treat unvaccinated horses.** These sites strongly advise PPE in a variety of situations.

Our Queensland Endurance Riding Association is now under extreme pressure from veterinarians to only allow Vaccinated Horses only to attend endurance rides. This is being blamed on BioSecurity Qld, saying that “if there is an outbreak.....” and that the requirements and restrictions are too much to deal with. The committees and vets could all be sued. The grounds would go into lockdown etc etc. Total scaremongering tactics. Horses attending endurance rides MUST have temperatures done for 10 days prior to the ride. IF there was a suspected case of Hendra at a ride, apparently the vaccinated horses could leave, but it is not proven that vaccinated horses could still not have and/or shed the virus.

We have verified instances where horses in paddocks with infected horses have NOT contracted the virus. It appears that the transmission is not that easy. What protocols are in place for horse transport companies? Recently a sick pony from down south was taken off a horse transport and left in Warwick. Vets would not attend as (even though it came from a non Hendra area) it may have Hendra. (eventually euthanized by a caring vet) BUT it seems the transport truck continued on with the rest of the horses on board, so Hendra was never an option?? What restrictions are placed on horse transport companies moving horses from Hendra areas to Non Hendra areas, including race horses? Or is there no perceived risk in moving horses about. If this is the case why are veterinarians making such an issue of it? This comparison hi-lights the varied differences in opinion and actions.

Veterinary practices have had a wake up call by being audited, and in cases their policies and procedures have been found wanting. Many professions are used to being audited and ensure everything is in order at all times. Veterinarians that have unfortunately died from contracting Hendra from infected horses have been shown to have NOT used PPE gear and not taken adequate precautions, some well before Hendra was an accepted or expected risk. That does not make their deaths less unfortunate but it has served as a huge learning curve for Veterinarians and the horse world in general.

- 12. The economic gain for vaccination to Veterinary Practices.**

There is no denying that the HeV vaccine is a good income earner for veterinary practices. 2 initial vaccinations, plus a booster every 6 months. The pricing varies but it is not unreasonable to expect to pay around \$150 per vaccination. In many cases veterinarians would normally only see the horse in case of accident or emergency, maybe once a year. Other owners may have more visits for teeth etc.

There is no denying the fact that the Hendra vaccination means that the horse will be seen EVERY six months. That is a gross gain for one horse of \$600 for the practice in the first 12 months.

The \$600 p/a multiplied out over 100 horse owners (and the numbers would most probably be much higher) that is \$60,000.00 extra per year for **that practice alone** that they NEVER would have had. This could be more depending on the travel and call out fee. The follow up would be approx. \$300 per year for 2 vaccinations. If Zoetis supply the vaccine to the vets at approx. \$45-\$50 there is still an excellent profit in it for the veterinary practice.

The profit and income is nothing to be sneezed at by any business! Multiply that amount across the state of Queensland and the gain to veterinary practices is astronomical. The gain to the Australian economy is not so great as Zoetis takes its profits back overseas.

It could be concluded that it is in the best financial interests of the veterinary profession to bully horse owners into vaccinating by withholding services to non-vaccinated horses. By refusing to attend events that require a veterinarian on hand, the event organisers are extorted into complying, to the detriment of many competitors. Under these circumstances, competitors from interstate for National Events have no requirement to vaccinate except to attend the event. Riders looking for overseas selection are placed in this untenable situation. I would also make note here that since Zoetis has taken over marketing the Tetanus and Strangles vaccines (used to be CSL) the prices of these has escalated hugely. What was \$25 three years ago is now \$48! Once again horse owners held to ransom.

In conclusion, I plead with the members of the Inquiry to bring some common sense to this situation. Ensure Veterinarians cannot use QWPH&S, Biosecurity or the Agriculture and Fisheries as a scapegoat for what they are doing at the moment. Hendra has been shown to not be an easily transmitted disease. Appropriate precautions and PPE can provide security from infection. Save the horse industry of Queensland!!

In the agricultural industries there are other very serious transmissible diseases that have not instigated a mandatory vaccination policy by veterinarians, to name just one: Leptospirosis Infection : Infected animals (cows, horses, dogs, pigs etc) may continue to excrete the bacteria into the environment continuously or every once in a while for a few months up to several years. Humans can become infected through: Contact with urine (or other body fluids, except saliva) from infected animals. Contact with water, soil, or food contaminated with the urine of infected animals.

Yours faithfully,

Vivien Butler.