



NORTH QUEENSLAND EQUINE CLINIC
STEPHANIE WILLIAMS BVS MANZCVS

"Providing Veterinary Care to Horses in North Queensland"

Stephanie Williams BVS MANZCVS

Gordonvale Qld 4865

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The Agriculture and Environment Committee
Hendra Vaccine Inquiry
C/- Mr Rob Hanse
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

To whom it may concern,

I am writing in reference to the Qld. Government Parliamentary Inquiry regarding the use of the Hendra vaccination in horses.

Firstly, a brief introduction on who I am. My name is Stephanie Williams, I am in my late twenties and I have been practicing as an equine veterinarian since the end of 2010. I have recently sat and passed memberships in the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists in the field of Horse Medicine. I am currently working in far North Queensland solely as an equine veterinarian. I continue to study my field of work, attend continuing education events every year and do everything in my power to ensure I have an updated knowledge when it comes to practicing as an equine veterinarian.

I have sacrificed a lot of my "youth" during my early 20's in becoming the best equine veterinarian I can be. Whilst my friends finished school, travelled the world, landed high paying jobs and are now settling down having children, I have been studying and practicing as an equine veterinarian. It is not unusual to work a minimum of 60+ hours a week (not including the extra study). For financial gain? No, unfortunately, despite what the general public think about veterinarians. For a luxurious job? No, trust me, treating a dying colic horse in the middle of the night or doing a dental in the middle of the day in the heat and humidity in North Queensland is not glamorous at all. Why then? Because I grew up loving horses. I still love and own horses. Also love having a job where I can treat horses and help people care for and enjoy healthy and happy horses. The other bits of the job just come with the territory of being an equine veterinarian.

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I am telling you about all of this because I think it is important for you to know this about me. I am caring, hardworking, I genuinely love horses, genuinely care for my clients, have not chosen this profession for "financial gain" and I believe without big-noting myself that I have some degree of knowledge pertaining to the use of ANY equine vaccinations, but particularly the Hendra vaccination and therefore I have a right to provide an opinion on its use. Hopefully you will consider my opinion as higher value than your standard horse owner, who has no medical or immunological training and (as unfortunately so many of them do) thinks that simply owning a horse gives them immediate knowledge on all topics relating to the horse.

I (fortunately) only practiced as a veterinarian in Queensland for a few years prior to the Hendra vaccination becoming available. I remember in my first job the outcry from the horse owning population for a "vaccination against Hendra to be released" and I also remembered our immunologist at university saying that "it was a very easy virus to develop a vaccination for" and that they "had developed a vaccination, it was just a matter of getting funding for it to become a licenced product". All I could think was, how frustrating, we had a vaccination in the pipelines; it just wasn't a licenced product!

I moved back up to FNQ (my hometown Cairns) because some of the clinics who had been attending horse calls had discontinued their veterinary service, leaving the horse owning population without a local equine veterinarian. One clinic had a member of staff become unwell and become infected with Hendra virus after being exposed to an infected horse. They had another couple of scares and decided to keep their staff safe they would cease treating all horses. I moved into Cairns providing an equine veterinary service to a community that knew full well what devastating effects this virus could have on veterinarians, their clinics and staff, the horses and their owners.

When we heard that Zoetis had come on board and announced the imminent release of this vaccination we heard a huge sigh of relief from so many veterinarians and horse owners around the North Queensland. I expected this relief would be felt throughout the rest of Australia, and for the most part I believe it was. Yet here we are, facing an inquiry into the use of the Hendra vaccination. It blows my mind that this has snowballed into such a controversial topic amongst a small group of people.

I have followed a lot of the posts on social media. Initially I had investigated myself a lot of the so called "reactions". I was genuinely concerned that they might hold some truth. However, the more I looked into these "reactions" the more I began to realise there were some very, vocal and opinionated people out there who were willing to sabotage the vaccination at any turn. I have

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found pictures of myself on certain anti-vaccination pages. Certain people (who are not my clients) have said some pretty hurtful and untruthful things on these pages and called for people to withhold recruiting my veterinary services, all because they have noticed I have been administering the vaccination. It is absolutely crazy, not to mention disturbing that there are individuals out there attacking veterinarians that they don't know or even use to treat their horses. I have, for a long while now withheld, posting anything on our clinic's face book page in relation to Hendra virus or vaccinations because I have feared what they ultimately use this post for.

I have administered the vaccination well over 2000 times and I have been in working alongside a clinic that has administered nearly 8000 doses. We have had only a very select few horses who have had localised swellings and slightly painful necks, even with a lot of these horses receiving over 5 doses of the vaccination. I just don't buy it when you hear people claiming these ridiculous associations of reactions to the vaccination. Additionally, I have to say that a localised swelling and inflammation at the site of a vaccination injection has to be considered a normal immune response. We accept that this is appropriate when we receive our immunisations, why now is this a big deal for it to occur in our horses who receive a vaccination?

It seems there are people looking for any reason to draw an association with any illness in their horse (whether it be lameness, allergy, colic, weight loss and so on) with the use of the vaccination. For hundreds of years we had horses succumbing to diseases, lameness issues and death. At least in my community and in our clinic's patients (who now are almost all vaccinated) there has been no increase in any mysterious horse illness's or deaths since the vaccination has been released. If you actually look at the individual reported "reactions" with a little bit of common sense and basic scientific and medical knowledge you have to see through the obscene claims?

I have noticed that most of the people who are being vocal about not liking the Hendra vaccination are the ones who have not even vaccinated their horses. Just ask all our clients who have vaccinated! Have they got a problem with the vaccination? Well other than the added cost, which I believe is a genuine concern, no, they don't. They are vaccinating their horses and will continue to do so and continue to take comfort in knowing that the chances of their horses or their family members being exposed to this terrible disease is reduced to a minimal risk, all because of this vaccination. When I have spoken to them about this inquiry, most did not have any idea it was occurring. Those who don't use face book or social media had no idea there was a population of horse owners who were against the use of the vaccination. It has come to great surprise to them that there are such outrageous claims being made.

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So far I think I have made my opinion on the vaccination itself clear. I believe it is an extremely good vaccination and it has great evidence to demonstrate its efficacy and safety. In the population of horses that I have personally immunised, there have been very few reported reactions and these have all been localised and minimal. I will continue to recommend its use in the horse population in Far North Queensland without hesitation.

Additionally, there are the regulatory requirements that we as veterinarians must do our best to abide by. The Veterinary Surgeons Act, the Queensland Health and Safety Act and the Biosecurity act. Trying to meet the requirements of all these acts and treat an unwell, unvaccinated, “potential Hendra positive horse” is quite difficult if not impossible! I have watched my friend recently be pushed into a corner whereby he had to plead guilty with regards to managing a Hendra positive horse. He is a great equine veterinarian and well respected by his peers and clients. He is my age, my good friend from university and all in all a person who genuinely cares about his job and his patients. I never want to find myself in his situation. So for me, my options in avoiding such a situation were quite simple- *a*) move to an area where there is no reported case of Hendra virus (yet), which again leaves the Cairns community short an equine veterinarian, OR, *b*) implement a Hendra vaccination policy to reduce the risk of being exposed to a Hendra positive horse and keep our staff, our clients and our horses safe and open to the best possible veterinary care.

This policy has been, for the most part, well received by our clients. Most of the issues that have surfaced simply involved the cost factor and we have done our best to ensure we charge at the lowest rate possible to cover our costs. I can honestly tell you now that there is no financial gain to be made by implementing the Hendra vaccination under our current pricing structure. I like that this is the case, as it keeps the cost down as low as possible for our clients and also demonstrates our level of commitment to helping implement the policy by not making money from the exercise.

It has been mentioned over and over again by “anti-vaxxers” that as equine veterinarians we should just wear personal protective equipment to every horse we see instead of implementing a vaccination policy. I invite any critic of our policy to come and spend some time with us (particularly in summer) to see firsthand how cumbersome and unreliable full suit Personal protective clothing is in far North Queensland. Aside from it generating huge amounts of waste and being a massive contribution to landfill if we had to gown up to see every horse, it is just not designed to be used safely in our heat and humidity and when treating a 500kg flight animal. Again, as a veterinarian who has to do this on a regular basis, I feel that I have the knowledge, experience and the right to be the person who decides if “just wearing PPE to every horse” is a suitable biosecurity practice for our clinic. It is not the people on social media who are so very

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vocal in sharing their misinformed opinions who get to decide this. It is not feasible and it is something that should be reserved as a last line defence in managing unwell horses, not as our only or primary protective measure against treating every horse who may or may not be in the pre-clinical stages of the disease. We have a vaccination that is safe and effective, why the hell not use it?

It has been a unique sequence of events with the release of this vaccine on a minor use permit and then its subsequent full registration. The whole registration process of this vaccination has been out on public display. Where there have been gaps in public knowledge on this process, it has been filled with rumour and hearsay. In some ways I believe it would have been a lot easier for the whole registration process to have been completed before Zoetis had released it. I am damn sure I wouldn't be writing this letter if that were the case. But then I wonder, how many more horses would have died, how many more people would have been exposed and potentially infected? How many more times did I have to attend suspicious horses and come home and lay in bed at night wondering if this one was going to come back positive? How many more unwell horses had to receive minimal treatment while waiting for exclusion tests to come back all the while suffering with a viral disease or colic that could have been treated promptly and effectively had it have been admitted to hospital? In the 3 years the vaccine has been out and available for administration I have no doubt it has saved many horses lives. Additionally it has made me feel a lot safer in doing my job.

I am happy with the Hendra vaccination, I am happy with our policy, I know my clients are happy with my policy and the vaccination. In fact the only people who have anything negative to say about it are a certain group of vocal people who have very little or no experience with use of this vaccination (or any vaccination for that matter) and to put it bluntly, do not have the credentials to provide these strong opinions on such topics and certainly these opinions should not be given such credit!

Claims that have been made by people, with no knowledge or experience in medicine, immunology or even basic use of vaccinations, that the vaccine has not undergone rigorous testing is just outright insulting to people like Debra Middleton who have dedicated their lives to researching this disease and developing and testing the vaccination. I urge you to liaise with people who are specialists and legitimate experts in this field and consider all of the thousands of horses who have been vaccinated with the vaccination with NO adverse effects. I am very concerned that the people who are just getting on and vaccinating and the vets who are just administering the vaccination without drama have not had the opportunity to submit their experience and opinions. If my clients up here are anything to go by, they cannot be bothered with the nonsense that is going on and would like to just carry on doing what they are doing. This

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inquiry is likely to attract submissions from the passionate, outspoken "anti-vaccination" group of people. I worry that in the submissions received may provide a very unfair representation of the horse owning population and also a very misguided representation of what people's experiences have been in immunising their horses with this vaccination. I hope that I am wrong, but I urge you to consider this point.

If you have any further questions, I am more than happy to assist in any way I can.

Kind Regards,


Stephanie Williams BVS MANZCVS (Horse Medicine)

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