

From: [REDACTED]
To: [Agriculture and Environment Committee](#)
Subject: Inquiry into the Hendra virus (HeV) EquiVaccR vaccine and its use by veterinary surgeons in Queensland
Date: Thursday, 21 April 2016 3:05:17 PM
Importance: High

Dear Committee,

The Queensland Horse Council has been closely involved with Biosecurity Queensland in providing information to the horse industry regarding all aspects of the Hendra virus and its prevention.

In 2008 after the Redlands outbreak where 8 horses and a veterinary employee died, the Queensland Horse Council began to have serious concerns about the apparent “re-emergence” of Hendra Virus. The QHC consequently became very pro-active when on closer investigation it became obvious that the disease was always there, was still misunderstood and inaccurate assumptions had been made from the previous cases about its impact. The QHC became proactive in liaising with Government and horse owners during outbreaks, with the objective of both parties to have a better understanding of the consequences of Hendra Virus and the difficulties involved in real life situations. In 2009 the QHC developed a variety of information seminars and in collaboration with Biosecurity Queensland conducted 65 information sessions for horse owners across the state from as far north as Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands, west to Chinchilla and Roma, and many in south east Qld. We also collaborated with Workplace Health and Safety to try and develop practical ways of dealing with workplace situations and difficulties involved in remote or low facility properties. Also thousands of facts sheets were circulated and research was conducted into property design and plants and trees that were less attractive to bats. As more research came forward about the virus, especially the fact that horses can be shedding virus before symptoms are visible, it became obvious that PPE was never going to be a long term, realistic solution. Armed with the fact that a CSIRO vaccine was developed and was ready for final testing, the horse owning public were polled at these seminars, and were overwhelmingly in support of a vaccine for horses. The suggested use by QHC of the vaccine at this time, was for “high care” horses. If people wanted to protect themselves, their horses and their vet, then the vaccine was the obvious option. For horses that were “low care”, that their owners were unlikely to opt for high expense vet care or were in situations where they received little daily contact, the owners would probably not vaccinate and would more likely euthanise a suffering animal. It was made very clear in the seminars only basic supportive care was possible before the horse was cleared of Hendra virus. These seminars continued through 2010/12, with the inclusion that funding had been secured for the vaccine trials, and that a vaccine was going to be available. The cry for the vaccine to be fast tracked during the later seminars overwhelming.

The human deaths from the virus have come from close handling of infected horses and the clinical signs of Hendra virus in horses are quite varied and include respiratory or neurological symptoms, and 75% of horses that have tested positive have died from the disease. Those that recovered have been euthanased. There have been seven known cases in humans, with four fatalities.

Biosecurity Queensland and the NSW Department of Primary Industries have stated the vaccine is the single most effective way of preventing Hendra virus infection. Bodies such as Queensland Health, WorkSafe Queensland and others recognise the public health benefits that the vaccine provides. The vaccine is unreservedly supported by the Queensland Horse Council. Equivac HeV is considered safe and effective by leading scientific, veterinary and regulatory bodies. The product has passed a thorough safety and efficacy review by the APVMA and has also been through an ACCC review regarding the issue of Hendra vaccine policies at equine events.

There is anecdotal evidence that there has been some severe reactions to the vaccine but little or no direct credible evidence has been presented to the APVMA. Again there has been unsupported claims of economic loss from the effects of the vaccine which pales into insignificance when compared to the economic loss and emotional distress caused by Hendra virus infection. Many of the claims are born on Social Media, quote mythical people and horses, and when investigated have no substance. The tactics used are very similar to the human Anti-vaccine movement.

It may be considered that the chances of a Hendra virus infection occurring are remote and the likelihood of human infection even more remote. However as of June 2014, a total of fifty outbreaks of Hendra virus have occurred in Australia, all involving infection of horses. As a result of these events, eighty-three horses have died or been euthanised. A further four died or were euthanised as a result of possible hendra infection. Case fatality rate in humans is 60% and in horses 75%. But the biggest impact on the horse industry is fear and aversion created by the disease, and the lack of control or real knowledge of where or when it will occur next. In 2011, which so far is the year with the most recorded incidents, many horse events were cancelled or were held with critically low entries, because of the fear of infection. The risk of an infected horse appearing at an event is very real – in 2009 a horse from an infected property was due to leave for the Magic Millions sale just 24hrs after the property was quarantined.

The Queensland Horse Council has first-hand experience dealing with the difficulty of using PPE when confronted with a stressed and aggressive horse and we fully support vets that decline to treat un-vaccinated horses or withhold treatment until Hendra infection has been eliminated. The effects of Hendra virus infection are catastrophic for the animals and humans alike. It is well known within the horse industry that the vaccine is regarded as the single most effective way of preventing Hendra

virus.

The actions of Workplace Health and Safety have placed vets in an untenable situation. It appears Workplace Health and Safety are acting according to their governing legislation and not to do so would not be in the interests of the industry.

When the vaccine was under permit from the APVMA there was a requirement for the vaccine manufacturer to maintain a database of vaccinated horses. This enabled vets and event organisers to determine the vaccination status of any horse they were required to have dealings with. It has come to our attention that there are some errors in the database that have occurred because of a number of reasons. This could place vets at risk and create difficulty and confusion for event organisers. The Queensland Horse Council believes an important database such as the Hendra vaccination database should be in the hands of Government and Property Identification Codes should be included in the data as a cross check for the accuracy of the entered information.

Social media is an important source of information for many people in our community. However it can be very destructive when the information presented is incorrect or misleading as is the case with the issues surrounding the Hendra vaccine.

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