

21 April 2016

The Agriculture and Environment Committee Hendra Vaccine Inquiry
C/- Mr Rob Hansen
Parliament House
Brisbane
Queensland 4000
Phone: 07 3553 6660

By email: robert.hansen@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Mr Hansen,

RE: Veterinarian Submission to Hendra virus Vaccine Inquiry

My name is Dr Bruce Howlett, and I am an equine veterinarian located at Mackay, Queensland. I have been in veterinary practice for 23 years, and our practice, Stabler and Howlett Veterinary Surgeons, has been providing services to equine clients for 40 years.

I wish to address the following Terms of Reference in the Qld Parliament's Hendra virus Vaccine Inquiry:

- The incidence and impact of adverse reactions by horses following vaccination and the reporting of adverse reactions and economic impacts of the Hendra vaccine.
- The development, trials and approval processes of the vaccine
- Who bears the risks of HeV infection and who incurs the costs and receives the benefits from each risk mitigation option.

Since the introduction of the Hendra vaccine our practice has administered more than 3000 doses of the vaccine. We have vaccinated various breeds and classes of horse from mini horses to Clydesdales, geldings, breeding stallions, empty mares and pregnant mares in all trimesters of pregnancy.

We have actively encouraged our clients to report *any* adverse reactions following Hendra vaccination to us. The incidence of adverse reactions reported by our clients has been extremely low, i.e. 0.007%.

Of these reactions almost all have consisted of minor localised swelling and tenderness at the site of injection. These reactions have been less severe and less frequent than those observed by ourselves and our clients when using the long registered and completely non-controversial Tetanus and Strangles vaccines.

Two horses have been noticeably lame in the left forelimb 24 hours post Hendra vaccine injection into the left neck muscles. The lameness in both these horses resolved within 12 hours of treatment with a single standard dose of oral phenylbutazone (a commonly used anti-inflammatory drug similar to Nurofen). Indeed one of these horses competed successfully in a campdraft 48 hours later.

Three mares belonging to one of our clients, who owns and vaccinates 30 horses, appear "a bit quiet for a couple of days" each time we vaccinate them. I note that these mares have been vaccinated multiple times whilst pregnant with no adverse outcomes to the mares or foals.

One gelding became seriously ill with signs of a viral illness 36 hours after initial vaccination with Hendra vaccine. He received intensive care and staged a complete recovery. It is not possible to establish a causal link between his illness and the vaccination. Given the delayed onset of signs and the lack of soreness or swelling at the site of Hendra vaccine injection, I do not believe his illness was related to the vaccine.

So I think it is fair to say that, in our hands, the Hendra vaccine has proven completely safe with negligible side effects.

Upon the release of the vaccine, Stabler and Howlett decided to price the vaccine as cheaply as possible to encourage its uptake by horse owners. In round figures we charge \$145 including GST for the initial dose and microchip, and \$115 for subsequent doses. Given the vaccine costs about \$55/dose landed in our fridge, we have to examine the horse, give the vaccine and administer the Hendra database; my calculation is the net return to our practice owners, before tax and interest, is less than \$12 per dose. Based on our figures, allegations that Hendra vaccine is a cash cow for Veterinary businesses are not sustainable.

To put these costs in perspective for non- horse owners, my farrier charges me \$126 to trim and shoe each of my horses. This occurs every 6 weeks.

I think we are very fortunate to have such a safe and effective vaccine available to combat a deadly disease that only occurs (so far anyway) in a tiny proportion of the world with a very small potential market. Dealing with sick, unvaccinated horses is very stressful for our Veterinarians, support staff and horse owners. By contrast, sick, Hendra vaccinated horses can be treated immediately, safely and thoroughly without the angst of an animal welfare and biosecurity nightmare.

I believe the early release of the Hendra vaccine under provisional registration saved lives and the registration authority should be commended for this. However their subsequent lethargy and apparent obstructiveness in completing the registration process fed into the hysteria campaign of the anti-vaccine lobby.

The heavy handed, adversarial approach of Qld Workplace Health and Safety when dealing with Hendra matters has been disgraceful and unhelpful. I have spoken to many young Vets who are more concerned with being prosecuted by Qld WH&S than they are about contracting and dying from Hendra virus. Members of my profession are being driven from equine practice in Queensland, not by concerns about their health, but by fear of the bureaucratic and legal nightmare that follows confirmation of a Hendra case.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Bruce Howlett BVSc

Director

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