

Veterinarians as essential service providers in the event of a COVID-19 workplace shutdown

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Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd



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About us

The Australian Veterinary Association is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 9000 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines.

Executive Summary

- The AVA is committed to working with the government, veterinary profession, animal owners and animal industry stakeholders to ensure the best outcomes for human and animal health and welfare throughout the COVID-19 pandemic response.
- AVA is critically concerned with the issue of veterinarians being able to continue to provide their important services in the event that Australian authorities impose regional or national shutdowns as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response.
- The AVA seeks assurance that veterinarians in private practice, regulatory, inspection, advisory, industry and research roles will be classified as essential service providers in the event of any such shutdown.
- **The impact of any shutdown that prevents veterinarians from performing their vital roles in the community must be considered in terms of what this will mean to not only animal health, welfare and biosecurity, but also to human health and mental wellbeing, food safety, and food supply chain integrity and continuity.**
- The AVA and its members are absolutely committed to implementing practical and effective risk management protocols in their businesses and workplaces to address the issue of minimising the spread of COVID-19 in the community, whilst still continuing to provide their essential services to benefit society.

Background

The COVID-19 /SARS-CoV-2 outbreak has evolved rapidly since December 31, 2019. The causative agent has been identified as a novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. It is thought to have originated in bats and spread to the human population via other animal species such as the pangolin, and as such is considered a zoonotic disease. The infection has since spread to affect approximately 176 countries and 6 continents, and on March 11, WHO characterised the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic.

Worldwide, health authorities have been forced to implement a variety of measures to slow the spread of the disease. These range from the implementation of heightened disinfection procedures and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), through to the total shutdown of movements into regions or entire countries, as well as shutting down non-essential businesses and workplaces. The social and economic consequences of these measures are enormous.

Essential services provided by veterinarians in the global context of COVID-19

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Veterinary Association (WVA) released a statement on March 18, advocating for the absolute requirement that veterinarians worldwide be designated as essential service providers in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic. (ATTACHMENT A).

Essential services provided by veterinarians in the Australian context of COVID-19

The AVA highlights the essential role of veterinary services in the Australian context, as follows:

Regulatory and food safety services

- Government veterinarians and Approved Australian Veterinarians fulfill many critical roles in the livestock supply chain that enable animals to be transported, transacted and processed for protein production in both **domestic and export markets**. It is essential that these roles can continue to be performed right throughout any COVID-19 shutdown so that food safety and security are both protected.
- Private livestock veterinarians provide vital services that assist in optimising productivity and commodity quality in production animals. These services are time critical and cannot be deferred without potentially serious consequences to the **human food chain**. Maintaining meat supplies through abattoirs, as well as dairy, eggs and other livestock commodities must be a high priority. Food safety and security must not be compromised.

Livestock veterinary services

- In addition to their role in food production, livestock veterinarians are engaged in disease diagnosis, treatment and emergency animal disease (EAD) **surveillance**. Veterinarians are on the frontline of endemic and exotic disease detection and response, and it is essential that these roles are fulfilled throughout any enforced shutdown.
- This veterinary service is currently even more important given the proximity of African Swine Fever to our country. If Australia were to be confronted by concurrent human pandemic and an EAD, the scale of the impact on our economy would be unprecedented. Australia must be able to retain veterinary EAD and endemic disease detection and response capacity before, during and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Companion animal veterinary services

- Companion animals including pets and horses play an important role in the community, and are considered members of the family in many cases. It is well known that companion animals contribute to **human health** (lowering morbidity from cardiovascular diseases for example) and reduce the national spend on health care significantly.
- More importantly is the role they play in the **mental health** of their owners, and this is especially the case for isolated or vulnerable members of our community. This will be even more important given the stress of the current situation.
- Veterinarians in small animal practice have an important role in advising their clients on the **public health** implications of COVID-19, and assessing and interpreting the available information around the risks of potential pet transmission of the disease. Currently there is no evidence that animal to human transmission is occurring, but this is an evolving situation and veterinarians are at the forefront of this issue.
- Veterinarians also have an ongoing role to advise clients about other potential zoonoses, pet handling and hygiene, and **surveillance** for any significant diseases (eg rabies) which could further impact the human population at this time.
- Given that millions of Australians are now staying at home, they will be confined in close quarters with domestic pets, and it is even more important that these pets remain healthy.
- It is critically important that veterinary practices are able to provide emergency treatments as well as essential medical and surgical care to any companion animals that are unwell. Elective procedures should be postponed under the circumstances, provided animal welfare will not be compromised.

Animal welfare

- Veterinarians fulfill many roles across the pet and livestock continuum ensuring that animal welfare standards are maintained. This becomes even more important in the COVID-19 situation, given the potential for domestic pets and livestock to be abandoned or mistreated in the mistaken belief that they play some role in COVID-19 transmission. An ongoing veterinary presence ensures that the public has access to accurate and scientifically based information and that ongoing care of animals is possible.
- Furthermore our domestic and international markets will expect that welfare standards in livestock production will be maintained at all times – and veterinary services are essential in achieving this.

One Health

- Given that COVID-19 and an estimated 70% of emerging infectious diseases in humans over the last 30 years have been zoonotic, veterinarians need to be constantly engaged in a “One Health” capacity.
- Veterinarians in practice, consultancy and government roles giving advice, controlling and detecting diseases and liaising with the human health authorities is now, more than ever, essential to ensure that the response to COVID 19 and any future zoonotic disease events is as effective as possible.

Managing risk in the provision of veterinary services in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the declaration on the COVID 19 pandemic, the AVA has been proactive in collating and distributing resources to the veterinary profession that enable them to implement practical and effective risk management procedures to minimise the spread of Coronavirus and the consequent impact on veterinary practices, their staff and clients. AVA believes that the combination of a strong scientific training in

epidemiology, infection control, disease diagnosis and management coupled with sound protocols such as those distributed by the AVA, will adequately equip veterinarians right across the animal health spectrum to provide services in a safe and effective manner, even in the event of any significant shutdown.

If veterinarians are granted 'essential service' status and permitted to continue to provide veterinary services in the event of regional or national shutdowns, AVA will ensure that veterinarians are fully aware of the need to comply with strict infection control and incident management protocols. AVA is committed to supporting the veterinary profession in doing so, and has zero tolerance for non-compliance under the circumstances.

We are working with the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture and animal health authorities to provide infection control and risk management resources to assist in compliance. These can be accessed as follows:

Veterinary Practice Information

- [Infection Prevention and Control for Veterinary Practitioners: COVID-19](#)
- [Risk management for veterinary workplaces: COVID-19](#)

Client Information Sheets

- [Client information sheet – AVA](#)
- [Client advice sheet – sample.](#)

Conclusion

The veterinary profession in Australia fulfills a wide range of roles and provides many vital services that benefit both animal and human health and welfare, as well ensuring food safety and security. In the current global COVID-19 pandemic, these services have become more important than ever. The ability of the veterinary profession, in its many forms, to continue to provide these services, even in the face of potential regional and national shutdowns, must be preserved. AVA and the profession has an absolute commitment to providing veterinary service continuity in a practical, safe and risk-managed manner.

ATTACHMENT A - follows.

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COVID-19 and Veterinary Activities designated as Essential

In the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Veterinary Association (WVA) jointly draw attention to the roles and responsibilities of the veterinary profession for public health. They highlight the specific veterinary activities which are key to ensure a continuum in food safety, disease prevention and emergency management.

To effectively tackle the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments around the world have taken restrictive measures to close non-essential businesses. These decisions raise questions regarding potential adaptations that need to be implemented by the veterinary profession.

In this context, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Veterinary Association (WVA) advocate for the specific activities of Veterinary Services to be considered as essential businesses.

Maintaining the activities that are crucial to public health

Veterinarians are an integral part of the global health community. Beyond the activities linked to the health and welfare of animals, they have a key role in disease prevention and management, including those transmissible to humans, and to ensure food safety for the populations.

In the current situation, it is crucial that, amongst their numerous activities, they can sustain those necessary to ensure that:

- national and regional veterinary regulatory and inspection services can oversee the integrity of public health,
- only healthy animals and their by-products enter the food supply to guarantee food safety for the populations,
- emergency situations can be addressed,
- preventative measures, such as vaccination against diseases with a significant public health or economic impact, are maintained.
- priority research activities continue.

Supporting veterinary activities in the current context

When conducting their work, veterinarians have the responsibility to safeguard their health, the health of those they work with, and their clients' health. Hence, they must ensure that appropriate levels of biosecurity are implemented, that their personnel are protected with the necessary equipment, and that animal owners are informed of precautionary measures in place. It is the responsibility of each individual to ensure that appropriate behaviours are respected in the framework of these activities, to avoid further spread of COVID-19.