Hendra virus response  
Australian Veterinary Association policy briefing  
5 July 2011

Background
The four current Hendra virus incidents are the latest of 19 known incidents since the virus was first identified in 1994. Hendra virus has been isolated in most of Australia’s flying fox populations, although cases in horses and people have so far only appeared in Queensland and northern New South Wales. Seven people have contracted this serious disease from infected horses and four have died as a result. Two of those who have died were veterinarians, and a veterinary nurse who survived her infection continues to have serious health problems as a result.

Because of the wide distribution of flying foxes and Hendra virus, it is possible that the disease could appear in horses in other parts of Australia. Veterinarians, their staff, horse owners and handlers caring for sick horses are at risk of serious illness or death from Hendra virus. Signs of Hendra virus infection are extremely difficult to differentiate from a large number of less serious conditions. It now appears that the incidence of Hendra infections is becoming more frequent, with four simultaneous investigations currently taking place across two states compared to previous years where there were none or only one or two at any time.

Concerns
The Australian Veterinary Association has a number of concerns in relation to the emerging Hendra virus situation.

- With a rising incidence of Hendra infections in recent years, the risk to treating veterinarians, horse owners and handlers is increasing.
- It is crucial that veterinarians can continue to attend sick horses to investigate suspected and exclusion cases of Hendra virus infection. This increased risk could well prove a disincentive to attend these cases.
- Cases often occur on weekends and out of hours, and getting samples quickly to government laboratories for testing has been recognised as a challenge.
- With a progressive winding back of government veterinarians working in the field over the last 10-20 years, the task of investigating these Hendra cases has fallen largely to private veterinarians.
- Private veterinarians also perform a vital function in educating horse owners and other workers about the disease and appropriate biosecurity measures.
- While the experimental horse vaccine has demonstrated great promise it is not yet available for use.

Policy imperatives
It is imperative that appropriate personal protective equipment is available and those who need it are trained to use it. In addition, the rapid availability and widespread uptake of the experimental vaccine will be crucial to minimising impacts of the disease into the future.

1. Support for biosecurity costs

With fewer government veterinarians working in the field, the task of investigating suspected cases now often falls to private veterinarians. These private veterinarians place themselves at the greatest risk of exposure by working daily with sick horses, many of which exhibit possible signs of Hendra virus but which could be caused by much less serious conditions.

To support the work of private veterinarians dealing with the risk of Hendra disease, Australian governments must make available a reimbursement program to pay for personal protective equipment used while examining suspected Hendra cases. While examining potentially infected horses, veterinary staff and others must also be appropriately protected from infection. The cumulative costs of disposable PPE for equine practitioners can be significant given that Hendra virus signs so often mimic other conditions.
Private practitioners also perform an important education function by informing horse owners and workers about the virus and ways to protect their own and their horses’ health from the disease. This support will provide additional incentive for veterinarians to perform this important education function performed in previous eras by government veterinarians in the field.

The claim system we propose is:

- Private veterinarians are provided with a supply of pre-paid courier labels
- The private veterinarian collects samples from suspect and exclusion Hendra cases and despatches them with a pre-paid courier label to the government laboratory to speed up the testing process
- When the results are notified and a laboratory accession number allocated, the veterinarian becomes eligible for reimbursement of $250 (GST exclusive) to cover the costs of PPE and Hendra awareness education involved in that case
- A reimbursement claim form is lodged with the appropriate state government citing the property identification code (PIC), horse microchip number and corresponding laboratory accession number
- The claim form with property (PIC), microchip and accession numbers would make this payment system traceable and auditable
- The claim is then processed and remitted to the veterinary practice within 30 days.

There is a similar claim system in place with surveillance work for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE) disease.

In Queensland, approximately 300 Hendra investigations are performed annually. Using this figure we estimate that to implement this claim system would cost approximately $500,000 per annum nationally. This is a small price to pay for ongoing Hendra disease surveillance and maintaining public confidence. This is a disease that claims lives of veterinarians and people who work in the horse industry who are merely doing their job.

2. Hendra vaccine

Veterinarians eagerly await the availability of a horse vaccine against Hendra infection. The Australian Veterinary Association urges all governments to provide the resources and political will required to fast-track the vaccine’s development and approval to ensure the earliest possible access.

We believe that all Australian horses should be vaccinated against Hendra virus. The most effective way to ensure the broadest uptake of the vaccine by horse owners is for industry organisations to drive the process. Horses entering agricultural shows, race meetings and all other horse events should show proof of vaccination status using a certificate and microchip identification system. There is a case for governments to mandate vaccination and microchip identification by legislation at least in areas where the disease has occurred or the risk is considered high. Vaccination when combined with identification by microchips would provide veterinarians and horse owners and handlers a high level of security against Hendra infections.

We will be working hard to communicate this to horse industry organisations, and will be looking to work with governments to communicate the public benefits of this approach.

Contact
For further information, contact Marcia Balzer, National Communications Manager on communications@ava.com.au or 0430 175 310.