Learning about equine biosecurity

Equine consultant, Jane Nixon, attended the first equine biosecurity course at the British Racing School in November last year, organised by Whorl Publishing. Here, she reports on some of the issues covered.

Knowledge of how to prevent the spread of equine infectious disease is essential to vets who work with horses. Horses that compete in top-level sport are increasingly required to move between countries, while those used for leisure pursuits may be kept in livery yards or fields. Both regularly mix with other horses and it is therefore important to adopt and maintain good biosecurity practices.

Risk assessment forms the basis for any biosecurity strategy and, depending on how animals are kept, means different risks of exposure to pathogens. Biosecurity means assessing the risks and putting protocols in place to minimise the exposure of horses to disease-causing agents.

With this in mind, Sidney Ricketts and Richard Newton designed a two-day course for vets on equine biosecurity, which was held in Newmarket. International speakers from Canada and Europe joined UK-based speakers from organisations including the Animal Health Trust, the British Horseracing Authority, the Moredun Institute, Defra and the University of Nottingham veterinary school.

On Day 1, lectures concentrated on epidemiology and biosecurity issues for equine infectious diseases endemic in the UK and Europe (such as equine influenza, equine herpesvirus and ringworm), those that are emerging or exotic to UK and Europe (including glanders, African horse sickness, West Nile virus and equine encephalitis) and for equine venereal infectious diseases in the UK and Europe.

The second day covered current considerations for producing specific equine transmissible disease control programmes and practical specific biosecurity programmes. We heard details about a number of collective biosecurity programmes that are available in the UK, including the Horserace Betting Levy Board’s Codes of Practice, the National Trainers Federation’s Code of Practice for Infectious Diseases, the Infectious Diseases of Horses Order and the African Horse Sickness Regulations.

In his lecture entitled ‘Cautionary tales’, Dr Newton described the lessons learnt from outbreaks of contagious equine metritis, equine viral arteritis, equine infectious anaemia, bluetongue and Schmallenberg virus, among others.

Thirty-five equine clinicians, veterinary nurses, industry managers and regulators attended the course. The lectures and discussions were of interest to all whether their working environment involved the occasional pony, primary care for horses in riding stables or for eventers, or large commercial racing stables and stud farms, equine hospitals and clinics, or national regulatory work. Everyone agreed that the avoidance and prevention of spread of equine transmissible diseases is always of great importance.

Take home messages
At the end of the course, Professor Ricketts summed up some of the important conclusions, commenting:

- Infectious agents are, and perhaps always have been, ‘cleverer’ than man.
- Antiseptic, antibiotic and anthelmintic medicines are no longer reliably efficacious.
- Some equine owners and managers seem to have developed the opinion that veterinary medicines can reduce the need for good, sensible horse management.
- Industry pressures have increased stress on some horse populations in terms of their population numbers, movements and social changes, increasing their fundamental susceptibility to infectious diseases.
- Veterinary surgeons, horse owners and managers should work together to reduce exposure to equine infections by seeking to prevent their introduction, limit their transmission (horse to horse and lateral spread) and manage horses in order to minimise their stress.
- Good and ‘smarter’ horse management should be used to help reduce our reliance on antibiotic and anthelmintic medicines,
the use of which should be voluntarily restricted.

- Infection control and biosecurity have never been more important to our equine industries and their veterinary advisers.
- There is a need to encourage and maintain education, particularly regarding: surveillance for syndromic indicators that are easily recognised by all associated with equestrianism, and emerging diseases, for which information is available for use and application.

There are already available proven industry codes of practice and similar infectious disease control tools, which are widely complied with by the thoroughbred industries of UK and some other EU member states. Greater communication is developing between the sports horse industries, essentially encompassing every breed and type of UK equid, using similar tools and/or developing and complying with ones designed for their own particular needs.

Post-course questionnaires were universally complimentary about the quality of the speakers and their presentations and indicated that it had been a stimulating, helpful and thought-provoking course.

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