

# We're calling for changes to the contact tracing programme for veterinary practices

CONTACT tracing is set to be a vital tool in helping to contain the spread of Covid-19 as governments across the UK ease lockdown restrictions. We are by no means out of the woods of the pandemic and we all have a part to play in protecting public health and reducing the pressure on health services. The veterinary profession has already done a huge amount to help slow the spread of the virus and we're urging practices to now comply with the test and trace programmes.

However, we are worried about the potential implications of these programmes for the veterinary sector. We know that many teams are anxious about what it could mean for service provision and animal health and welfare if a colleague tests positive.

By speaking to contact tracers or by providing information via an online system, the test and trace programmes ask people who have been tested positive for Covid-19 to identify those they have been in close contact with in the 48 hours before they developed symptoms – either direct face-to-face contact of less than 1 m (such as family members and partners), or contact that was less than 2 m for more than 15 minutes. Those individuals identified will also be asked to self-isolate for 14 days.

The way we work together in clinical practice means close contact is inevitable. In the instance of a colleague testing positive for Covid-19, the reality is that a whole team might then have to self-isolate. We understand the need for these requirements, but they could seriously hinder the profession's ability to deliver veterinary services throughout the UK.

The BVA's advice is to keep working in fixed pairs or small teams to limit contact, and to continue supporting your neighbouring practices: be ready to step in and help if their teams are short-staffed due to self-isolation. However, we know this won't be possible for every practice, in particular for our colleagues working in rural and remote areas, who often work in very small teams anyway and where there simply are no neighbours to call on.

Our members have also asked whether veterinary professionals need to self-isolate if they were wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) during the 15 minutes of contact with an infected colleague.



**Daniella Dos Santos,**  
Daniella Dos Santos is the president of the BVA.



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Our understanding of the contact tracing systems in their current form is that they aren't flexible enough to take these details into account. Those working as contact tracers won't be able to discuss the different levels of risk associated with wearing different types of PPE during a contact, and the algorithms of the online system will only be able to look at basic information given.

That's why, as a top priority, we're asking governments to treat people working in a veterinary context in a similar vein as they plan to for those working in human healthcare settings, schools and prisons. In the English system this would mean that veterinary professionals would have their calls escalated to a 'tier 1' handler; that is, to a local public health expert. These calls allow for more nuanced discussions with

people who would understand our clinical ways of working and how to assess the level of risk if PPE had been worn during contact with an infected colleague.

We're also asking for veterinary professionals to be among those who are prioritised for access to the additional testing as it is rolled out. This would enable those who are self-isolating but who test negative for Covid-19 to return to the practice rota quicker.

These relatively simple steps could be the difference between a practice effectively having to shut down – potentially depriving a local area of veterinary services for two weeks while the staff all self-isolate – or being able to remain open, while still prioritising colleague and client safety.

We're engaging directly with parliamentarians on these issues, and I was able to raise it with a number of MPs and peers at our virtual Westminster briefing last week. We'll continue to push for these changes as part of our ongoing efforts to ensure the veterinary community is supported and championed throughout this crisis. In the meantime, please offer your support to neighbouring practices where you can so that we can get through this together.