

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE FEASIBILITY OF A NATIONAL TRACEABILITY REGISTER FOR ALL HORSES

SUBMISSION

Background

Since 2002 I have been actively engaged in research primarily into the equestrian sport of eventing, collecting and analysing data on injuries to riders and horses incurred during the cross-country phase of the sport, and exploring ways in which to make the sport as safe as it can be. I have also been involved in research into the safety of jumps racing in Australia (see publications).

The equestrian sport of eventing

Concerns about eventing have focussed primarily on safety for the riders, given that there have been 68 known rider deaths in eventing since 1993. Analysis of the circumstances of these deaths reveals striking correlation between rider deaths and rotational horse falls, in which the horse somersaults over a jump, ejecting the rider and landing on top of the fallen rider. Significant efforts have rightly concentrated in reducing the risk of these rotational horse falls. These safety innovations have resulted in many changes to the rules, as well as to the construction of jumps, including the introduction of systems (frangible pins and MIM clips) which ensure that jumps collapse when hit with sufficient force (i.e., when the horse does not clear the front face of the jump sufficiently).

In managing risk in eventing (or indeed in any situation in which there are unwanted outcomes), data are everything. Without comprehensive, comparable and verifiable data, it may not be possible to determine the circumstances of riders' falls, deaths and/or injuries. If we do not know the how or the why, those governing the sport are limited in their capacity to initiate appropriate changes in order to make the sport as safe as it can be. Similarly, without comprehensive data about non-fatal falls, we cannot know whether any apparent decrease in the rates of rider falls, injuries or deaths is the result of innovations and improvements in safety, or just chance and luck.

Horse welfare

However, it is not only riders who die in the sport of eventing. Horses die too, and in surprising numbers. I have been compiling as yet unpublished data on horse deaths in eventing over the last 20 years, identifying a total of 150 eventing horses which are known to have died or been euthanased, the vast majority during the cross-country phase, or shortly afterwards, but several during the warm-up phase.

However, simple numbers do not tell the whole story, because there is no central national or international reporting system which records the post-competition lives of eventing horses or even what happens to them when they leave a specific competition site. Their story ceases when they make their last competition appearance. It is not possible to determine whether they have been retired, died, euthanased as a result of an injury incurred at that last appearance or at any time afterwards, sold on to another owner, and possibly registered under another name, or exported to another country, with the possibility of ending in an overseas slaughterhouse. From a horse welfare standpoint, this may be unacceptable in today's environment, in which any perceived threat to a horse's welfare is seen in a very negative light, and often results in significant agitated social media coverage. There are also safety implications for the horse community, since it is possible that individual horses with a particular past may pose a safety risk to future owners who may not be aware of the implications of that past.

Adequacy of existing registers

One of the complications facing the non-racing equine community in terms of data collection is that horses are simply not counted in any systematic way. Performance horses may be registered in many different jurisdictions. 'Leisure' horses may not be registered at all. Breeders report to their own studbooks, but there is no overall counting system for horses. A single horse which competes

in, say, dressage, show jumping and eventing may very well be registered with Equestrian Australia for official competitions, as well as with one or more clubs for unofficial competitions, and with a breed society, potentially under several different names. The horse standing beside it in the paddock may not be registered with any organisation at all. This horse is effectively invisible. When we know exactly how many cows there are in Australia, because they are registered under a national system, it seems absurd that we don't even know how many horses there are, let alone what their life outcomes are.

Biosecurity

There are many issues arising from this lack of identifying and tracing individual horses. One is biosecurity, particularly as horses are highly mobile when compared to other domestic animals, and often move freely and frequently between and across States and Territories. The equine influenza outbreak in 2007 highlighted the problems of not having a traceability system. Equine flu devastated the racing industry in NSW and Queensland. Equestrian sport was seriously affected, with a large number of competitors confined with their horses for weeks in Warwick, Queensland. The Adelaide International Three-Day Event was cancelled that year, and the qualifying three-day event competition for the Beijing Olympic Games, to be held in Sydney, was also cancelled. This outbreak had economic impacts on personal and business incomes, tourism, trade, export of horses and genetic materials, and costs to government.

Conclusion

If there were a national database of all horses, with all equine bodies connected with it, and with each other, we would know not only how many horses there are in Australia, but also know what happens to them. This would be transparency at its best.

Publications

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