

Submission to the review of the Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease

Ken Jacobs BVSc MVSc MACVSc

Equine Veterinarian and Farmer

Failure to Diagnose Emergency Animal Diseases Quickly - A Key Gap

A key component of Emergency Animal Disease preparedness is the need to provide surveillance for disease and diagnose disease quickly. If there is failure to diagnose Foot and Mouth (FMD) early in an outbreak the scale of the outbreak is exponentially greater than it would be if the disease was diagnosed quickly. FMD is extremely contagious, and spread is exceptionally rapid. Early diagnosis may prevent it getting into the wild animal populations and becoming a widespread outbreak.

In 2003 Frawley identified that 25 % of farmers routinely use veterinarians and this was a risk for animal health, biosecurity and control of disease. In 2011 Dr Matthews in his report on Preparedness for FMD identified that there were significant risks associated with failing to diagnose Foot and Mouth Disease because "farmers were more likely to evaluate animal health risks themselves than to rely on experts". He identified that veterinary involvement on farms was a significant gap and recommended further evaluation. This occurred and in 2014 the OIE found that Australia should "Develop strategies to maximise the availability of private veterinarians for assistance during emergency animal disease responses" To date there has been no effective action to address this issue.

Much of the advice to farmers relating to FMD and LSD is to call the Exotic Animal Disease hotline. However, farmers identify sick, lame and dying animals. This should be changed so farmers should call their local vets to diagnose disease. FMD in sheep may be a mild disease and is not obvious. Diseases do not come with a label; diagnosis requires knowledgeable veterinarians supported by great laboratory services. MLA and much of the Government and AHA publicity relating to FMD and LSD says to contact the EAD hotline. The advice should be to contact your local vet or, in NSW, the Local Lands Services vet. They, then contact the hotline.

Most rural veterinary practices developed at a time when their businesses were underpinned by programs to eradicate TB and Bovine Brucellosis. There are no such programs now. There is currently huge demand for treatment of dogs and cats and horses. Combined with a lack of demand for local vets to work with cattle and sheep work, many vets understandably focus on companion animals and horses. Farmers that do involve vets in their livestock enterprises often use specialised vets who travel huge distances to service their clients. These vets really help many of those producers.

The current situation is that some rural veterinary businesses have closed, and, in many areas, practices have become increasingly focussed on small animals and horses, many not even doing any

farm animal work. For example, the Parkes practice has closed, and Dubbo has only 2 private vets who do production animals. Many peri-urban city practices do not do production animals. The reduction in the number of private vets doing sheep and cattle adds to the risk of failure to diagnose disease early in an outbreak, a key risk identified by Matthews.

It is very important that farmers routinely seek veterinary advice for all sick and dying animals. There needs to be veterinarians available to diagnose disease. Hopefully, in 100% of cases the problem diagnosed will be a disease that is endemic or present in Australia. However, there are examples of huge losses of sheep, without farmers seeking proper veterinary advice. The cost to individual farmers massively exceeds the cost of the disease investigation. The risks of failure to investigate losses is significant as there may be an EAD. In 2003 Frawley determined that "Only 20% to 30% of individual producers in livestock industries regularly engage private veterinary surgeons. In most instances, veterinarians are only called to treat an individual animal and whole herd/flock care is seldom undertaken" This situation is now more serious with older experienced veterinarians retiring and younger veterinarians in many mixed practices simply not getting necessary experience.

The sheep cattle and goat sectors rely on livestock production assurance to provide confidence to the community in respect of food safety, animal welfare and biosecurity. The LPA system is managed by Integrity Systems Co a subsidiary company of MLA. Farmers are required to complete welfare and biosecurity modules and then undertake a moderately rigorous audit. The audits are focussed largely on farm records. Only a small proportion of farmers are audited each year. This LPA system supports both vendor declarations and NLIS. The LPA farm assurance program is largely a box ticking exercise that is focussed largely on farm records. The farm assurance programs note the roles of veterinarians; however, the system does not involve veterinarians in preparing the farm plans and actions. There is an opportunity to further support food safety; farm biosecurity; animal health and production; and animal welfare practices by involving veterinarians in preparing these plans. Veterinarians are not auditors and their role should be focussed on supporting the development of the plans rather than the auditing of them.

There are three areas in which local vets work can help with farm businesses planning. Currently these are legally required with LPA farm assurance planning, but veterinary involvement is not required.

- Firstly, developing animal health plans. Animal health plans, if properly developed and implemented improve productivity, reduce the incidence of disease, ensure the effectiveness of vaccines and drenches, and may reduce the costs of inputs.
- Secondly farm animal welfare planning. The routine use of pain relief and ensuring animals are treated properly has become a major issue in many countries. It is important that farmers have welfare plans and actions in place to ensure ongoing community confidence in the humane treatment of sheep and cattle. This will be increasingly important in some export markets.
- Thirdly farm biosecurity. Biosecurity is increasingly important as more farmers trade livestock. It is essential that farmers who trade livestock have plans to ensure that purchased stock are properly assessed, then are isolated and properly treated when they arrive. Part of the biosecurity planning should be to ensure that vendor declarations and NLIS transfers are accurate and completed. Managing biosecurity if neighbours trade livestock may also need consideration.

A way of solving the falling numbers of vets doing sheep and cattle work is to develop a mechanism for vets to work with farmers to develop their farm plans. It is recommended that:

- **Review the LPA farm assurance requirement with a view to changing the focus to one that more is focussed on food safety, biosecurity, animal health and welfare.**
 - **A funding model involving Governments and MLA should be developed so that private veterinary practitioners are required to be part of preparing the farm biosecurity, welfare and animal health plans.**
 - **Prioritisation of veterinary laboratory capacity, including workforce skills, sample transportation, disease testing, rapid diagnostics and standardised reporting.**
-
1. <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/animal-plant/pests-diseases/animal-pests-diseases/footandmouth.pdf>
 2. <https://www.woah.org/app/uploads/2021/03/finalreport-pvs-australia.pdf>