

The Future Impact of the EC Animal Health Strategy for Veterinarians in the UK

Current threats to animal health in the UK are monitored by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) and DEFRA. The VLA has a role in monitoring the prevalence of existing and new diseases in livestock. However, there is currently no official surveillance of disease in small domestic animals or wild life, which both act as reservoirs of infection. For example, cats and voles are both carriers of Cow Pox and are therefore potential sources of infection.

The VLA produce monthly reports highlighting endemic diseases which are on the increase such as, currently, Parasitic Gastroenteritis, and any disease outbreaks in the UK.

Presently DEFRA monitors animal disease around the world by compiling data from various bodies including the European Commission, OIE, and Veterinary administrations of trading countries including EU member states. It is intended that a single source of information would be of greater benefit.

DEFRA recognise the need to monitor animal disease globally in order to assess the risk of a disease entering the UK and to take appropriate precautionary measures. Current threats in Europe include African Swine Fever, Blue Tongue, Classical Swine Fever, Avian Influenza H5N1 and H7N1, Rabies and Swine Vesicular disease¹. In the event of an outbreak it is recognised that there is a need for good fast communication. Before the risk assessment is undergone DEFRA must seek clarification with the European Commission. If DEFRA deem it necessary to take action, this is carried out by the International Animal Health Division in concert with the EU.

The Animal health strategy aims to raise awareness of biosecurity at farm and national level. In practice this will mean that in a disease outbreak, disease spread from farm to farm, or even across national borders, should be less of a risk as better biosecurity measures will be in place. "Prevention is better than the cure" is the guiding principle of the strategy, which hopes to reduce the incidence of disease and minimise the impact of outbreaks when they do occur by introducing precautionary measures, disease surveillance and research. If better disease control is achieved, it should mean veterinarians in the UK will spend less time on farms treating endemic infectious diseases. Instead they may spend more time advising clients on appropriate biosecurity measures and developing health plans.

Research is an important element of the strategy to ensure that the animal health rules and advice are based on sound science. For example, through research into the structure of a specific virus appropriate disinfectants may be identified for its control. Through the strategy the network of reference laboratories across Europe will be developed. This should not only increase scientific knowledge throughout Europe but also provide exciting job opportunities in veterinary research.

The Animal Health Advisory Committee includes representatives from non- governmental organisations spanning the animal health sector such as food chain businesses, the veterinary profession and animal health bodies. This should improve communication between those involved with animal health throughout the UK, across EU member states and elsewhere whenever specific expertise is needed. The committee will be able to provide the very best guidance on appropriate levels of disease control, public health protection and advice on priorities for action and communication within Europe. This is necessary now more than ever because with the

phenomenon of global warming new threats to animal health are emerging in Europe and good international communication will allow these threats to be dealt with effectively. We are already seeing the introduction of new diseases, for example Blue Tongue, not previously present in the UK and the rest of Northern Europe before the 2006/2007 outbreak. Blue Tongue affects all ruminants and is spread by certain types of biting midges, *Culicoides*. It is normally seen in Africa and Southern Europe. The 2006/2007 outbreaks have been attributed to global warming, which allowed the virus to survive in the midges and extend their season. (Virus development in *Culicoides* vectors is unable to occur at temperatures below about 10°C to 15°C) ²

The strategy will re-evaluate priorities which are changing with new emerging challenges it will focus on diseases with "high public relevance"³, which is defined as those that will impact on health, society and economy. Since mid- 2001 BSE has been under active surveillance in EU member states. In 2008 over three and a half million cattle were tested and only 1834 cases were confirmed⁴. It is arguable that these cases could in fact be false positives as the test may not have a sensitivity of 100%. BSE's low prevalence suggests it may be a disease to re-prioritise. The re-prioritisation of diseases may affect the work of veterinarians in the UK as they have a key role in the testing and prevention of disease. New priorities may include Blue Tongue ,as this has already had a huge impact on the economy, and Avian Influenza H5N1 which potentially has an inconceivable impact on health and society should the virus become transmissible between humans.

Avian influenza is a good example of how human and animal health are intimately connected. The veterinary profession has to be in a position to advise and act on zoonotic threats and the new Animal Health Strategy's research and guidelines will put veterinarians in a better position to do so. The strategy will provide better surveillance data and with its new traceability system it will be easier to see the origin of the disease should an outbreak occur. By locating the origin of the outbreak the spread of disease should be easier to control. At the same time the advisory committee will give guidance on the correct level of protection so that scenes like the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak can be prevented. In the event of such an outbreak the strategy has crisis management units and an EU vet rapid response team. Some veterinarians in the UK may become part of such teams. For others it means that should an outbreak occur they can be given advice and guidance in the face of a disease or situation that may be new to them.

Hannah Smith
27.10.08

¹ International disease monitoring, April to June 2008
The Veterinary Record Volume 163 : 319-322 (2008)

² DEFRA Technical Review- Blue tongue: The Virus, Host and Vectors
Version 1.5; 21 November 2002
http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/pdf/bluetongue_technical.pdf

³ The new Animal Health Plan (2007-2013): 'Prevention is better than the cure' Action Plan
http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/strategy/actionplan_en.htm

⁴ TSE Surveillance Statistics, ACTIVE TSE SURVEILLANCE IN GB
http://www.defra.gov.uk/vla/science/docs/sci_tse_stats_active.pdf

Other Sources

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/vla/>

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/index.htm>