



Maintaining a clean facility is one starting point of being proactive in preventing and containing the spread of contagious diseases

Vaccinations Just a Start

IN BATTLING CONTAGIOUS DISEASE, KEEPING BARN MANAGEMENT UP TO DATE CRITICAL

By **AMANDA DUCKWORTH**

AFTER THE PAST several years most people are all too familiar with protocols aimed at containing the spread of a contagious disease. When it comes to equine care, contagion concerns long have been a part of good barn management.

While speaking on fire awareness and prevention, Ben Franklin is credited with advising in 1736 that, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” but that axiom can just as easily be transferred to barn biohazard safety protocols.

Following standard vaccine recommendations and maintaining a clean facility are starting points of being proactive. While a plan is important, creating and maintaining protocol are not always something that happen. A willingness to listen to and follow veterinary advice is a crucial part of the process, meaning veterinarians are more aware than ever about the importance of being able to communicate effectively.

As the Equine Disease Communica-

tion Center explains: “In the equine industry, biosecurity refers to the precautions we take to limit the spread of disease when working with horses. These preventative measures are vital to maintaining the health of all horses regardless of their occupation, whether they be a companion animal, a working horse, or a show animal. Even the smallest precautions can help to keep horses safe from infectious diseases.

“Best practices in disease prevention include a combination of following a vaccination plan and taking simple, but important, biosecurity measures in your barn while traveling, at events, and when caring for your horse. Suggested biosecurity protocols differ, depending on the situation and location.”

Core vaccinations, supported by both the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Equine Practitioners, include tetanus, eastern equine encephalomyelitis, western equine encephalomyelitis, West Nile virus, and rabies. Risk-based vaccination guidelines cover things such as anthrax, botulism, equine herpesvirus, equine influenza, equine viral arteritis, leptospirosis, Potomac horse fever, rotaviral diarrhea, snake bite, strangles, and Venezuelan equine encephalomyelitis.

In addition to making sure a horse has its proper vaccines, it is important to keep up-to-date records. Any time a horse relocates, copies of its vaccination and health maintenance records should also make the trip. Equally important, is that equine facilities establish clear health entry requirements.

In addition to having access to vaccines, the healthier and happier a horse is in general, the better chance it has at dealing with disease. As the EDCC explains, reducing stress and optimizing nutrition can help protect horses. Stress can compromise immune systems; making horses more susceptible to infection while healthy horses are more



Veterinarians are aware of the importance of effective communication

likely to be able to fight off possible infections.

The AAEP also notes other external factors that can contribute to increased infectious disease risk include overcrowding; parasitism; inadequate sanitation; contaminated water source/supply; concurrent disease; inadequate rodent, bird, and insect control; and movement of people, vehicles, and/or equipment on and off facilities during infectious disease outbreaks.

Beyond maintaining general good health and following vaccination protocols, a core part of barn management is having a system in place to help prevent disease breakouts. The AAEP has published and recently updated an in-depth document explaining general biosecurity guidelines for those looking for a place to start and for others aiming to ensure systems are up to current standards.

“While there are overarching infection control principles which have broad applicability across most diseases and facility types, every equine event and every premises is unique,” explained the AAEP. “Therefore, it is important for veterinarians to work with other event and/or facility stakeholders in advance of an urgent issue (i.e., before an outbreak) to develop plans that are practical and effective for the particular facility in question. Many people focus on the ‘outbreak management’ aspect of biosecurity, but arguably more important are the day-to-day biosecurity practices that minimize the likelihood of a disease outbreak in the first place or make it easier to quickly contain an outbreak with minimal disruption and expense.

“Therefore, a comprehensive biosecurity plan developed collaboratively with an equine veterinarian includes implementing routine preventative protocols that take into consideration all means by which infectious disease could be introduced and spread, as well as developing protocols for responding to confirmed or suspected cases of infectious disease.”

Obviously, how to prevent and mitigate contagion within the equine community is a global concern. In April 2022, the German journal *Tierärztliche Praxis Ausgabe G: Grosstiere—Nutztiere* published the review “Management and hygiene measures during an outbreak of herpes, influenza, strangles, or infections with multidrug resistant bacteria.”

“General cleanliness, hand hygiene, avoidance of stress, regular deworming, and vaccinations belong to the basic hygiene measures in a horse herd,” explained researchers. “All new or returning equids should be submitted to a quarantine period as an important prevention measure. Repeated washing and disinfection of hands might prevent spreading of infectious agents to people and horses. The conception of a hygiene plan, including general biosecurity procedures

and standard operating procedures in a case of an outbreak of an infectious disease, zoonosis, or colonization with multi-resistant bacteria, is strongly recommended.

“As soon as the disease is suspected, extended hygiene measures including protective clothing, cleaning, disinfection, and isolation of potentially infected animals should be implemented. Prompt confirmation of the

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HEALTH ZONE

Contagion Concerns



Daily practices that reduce the likelihood of an outbreak include the use of a quarantine barn

causative agent by examination of appropriate samples is crucial. It is important to adjust all safety measures based on the contagious nature of the respective pathogen and its major transmission routes.”

Working with a trusted veterinarian to put proper biosecurity protocols in place is highly recommended. No matter the venue, having a safe way to quarantine new equine arrivals is key to any plan.

“The most common way infectious diseases are spread is when a new horse that is a carrier of the disease arrives at a property,” explained Alicia Skelding of the University of Guelph’s equine center in the paper “Biosecurity for Horse Owners.” “A veterinary examination is recommended prior

to purchasing a horse. Depending on where the horse has originated from, the veterinarian may advise for specific tests to be conducted to rule out infectious diseases.

“New horses should be isolated from resident horses for 30 days. The horse should be checked daily for signs of illness, including monitoring the horse’s temperature, food, and water intake. Separate stable/yard equipment, buckets, grooming supplies, tack, etc. should be used for new horses and marked with red tape. The new horse should be handled last, morning and night, and hands should be washed upon leaving the horse’s stall or paddock.”

The value of being prepared is generally understood, but it competes with the reality of actually finding the time,

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getting the proper information, and taking the steps to carry out protocols. In May 2022, the *Equine Veterinary Journal* published “Challenges to exotic disease preparedness in Great Britain: The frontline veterinarian’s perspective.”

The objective of the study was to examine veterinarians’ experience of and attitudes toward exotic disease preparedness. The participants in the study were selected to represent a variety of experience, clientele, and location. Their interviews were recorded and analyzed.

“Exotic diseases pose a significant risk to horse health and welfare,” explained researchers. “Several stakeholder groups, including primary care veterinarians, share responsibility for maintaining freedom from pathogens that cause exotic diseases.”



WHILE THERE ARE OVERARCHING INFECTION CONTROL PRINCIPLES WHICH HAVE BROAD APPLICABILITY ACROSS MOST DISEASES AND FACILITY TYPES, EVERY EQUINE EVENT AND EVERY PREMISES IS UNIQUE.”

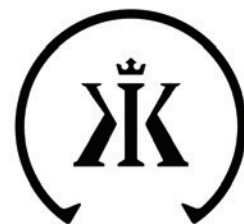
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The results of the study showed three core themes regarding challenges to effective preparedness. The first result centered around the idea of being a reactive generalist, as the veterinarians were primary care practitioners.

“Participants often found themselves working to the ‘firefighter’ model of medicine, responding to ill-health instead of proactively providing wellness services,” the study found. “This ingrained reactive approach meant that participants struggled to shift into a preventive mindset in the absence of an imminent threat. By identifying as generalists,

participants acknowledged they could not reasonably be an expert in all areas of veterinary medicine. Over time, their expertise became targeted toward common condi-

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tions, moving them further away from specialist topics like exotic diseases.”

The second concluding theme was an acknowledgement that there are limits to a veterinarian’s influence. The client must be a willing participant for an effective working relationship.

“Within the veterinarian-client relationship, some participants viewed their role as information providers, or educators, and experienced frustration when clients did not follow their advice,” said researchers. “The need to be influential stemmed from an assumption that the client lacked sufficient knowledge. By acting as an educator, participants aimed to change their clients’ behaviors through providing more knowledge.

“Participants perceived a greater level of influence when a positive client relationship was established; however, good veterinarian-client relationships were sometimes undermined by more accessible and preferable information sources, such as other horse owners on social media. The increased availability and accessibility of competing influences were added challenges to the veterinarian’s ability to influence positive change.”

Finally, researchers identified the lack of cohesion within the horse industry itself.

“An effective response to an equine infectious disease outbreak would rely on action at the population level,” concluded researchers. “However, the culture of the wider horse industry in which participants worked was characterized by a lack of cohesion amongst its members. Overarching issues with coordination across sectors, and unbalanced resources between racing and non-racing horses, reflected a siloed industry structure. Participants perceived that owners, in general, did not have a sense of their



New horses should be isolated from resident horses and then checked daily for signs of illness, including monitoring temperatures, food, and water intake

horse belonging to a national herd.”

Researchers did note that the Thoroughbred industry is more invested in prevention protocols when compared with those owning pleasure horses. In England the racing sector widely accepts the biosecurity protocols created by regulatory and statutory bodies, such as the British Horseracing Authority and the Horserace Betting Levy Board.

Or, as a vet in the study put it: “We all go by the HBLB Codes of Practice in the Thoroughbred industry, which is pretty well rammed down the throat of everyone now.”

Because veterinarians are such an integral part of any good equine management program—both in regular situations and during a biosecurity crisis—being able to communicate successfully with clients is becoming more of a priority. In October 2020, *BMC Veterinary Research* published “An integrated review of the role of communication in veterinary clinical practice.”

“Communication has always been an important pillar for veterinarians,” explained researchers. “The ability to communicate effectively leads to better clinical outcomes, such as client satisfaction during the veterinary visit and increased client compliance with the veterinarian’s recommendations. Many factors are known to drive the quality of client-veterinarian communication such as the veterinarians’ communication skills and clients’ expectations. A ‘client-centered’ approach has been promoted to facilitate clients’ adherence, aiming to make more clients decide upon a treatment option in line with the veterinarian’s recommendations.

“Failure to effectively communicate with clients may result in health, safety, and legal repercussions for veterinarians. The quality of communication has a direct impact on the quality of care. In particular, in the field of veterinary communication, there is a growing interest in the ways of delivering difficult news to clients; the

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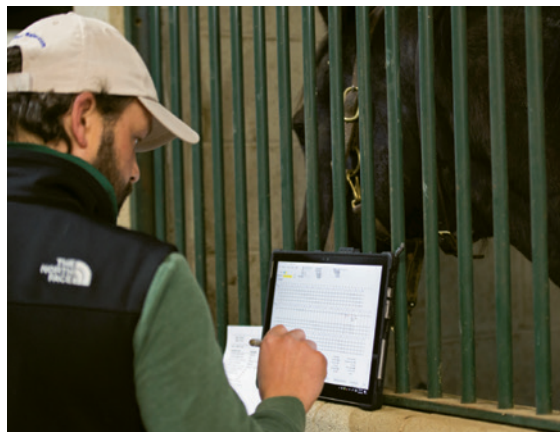
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role of communication skills in the veterinary education curriculum; and the application of client-centered communication approach within the veterinarian-client relationship.”

In all, 48 studies were included for analysis after an in-depth review by two independent reviewers. Researchers found that the existing body of research on veterinary communication can be classified into three major areas: client-veterinarian communication, cross-disciplinary communication in a professional veterinarian team, and training of veterinary communication skills.

“This review detailed the complexity of agendas in the field of veterinary communication,” researchers concluded. “The results indicate that veterinary practitioners can further benefit from training on



Basics such as first-rate record-keeping and frequent hand washing can stop the spread

specific communication skills that address the agendas found in veterinary communication research. Furthermore, the veterinary curriculum should include a component on communication training that equips veterinary students with the necessary communication skills that allow them to effectively communicate with different stakeholders such as clients and colleagues with and across the field of veterinary science.”

Working together, horse owners and veterinarians can make strides in both containing outbreaks when they do occur and preventing them in the first place. However, a willingness to make a plan, follow established protocols, and listen to expert advice is an important part of the process long before a contagion problem presents itself. **BH**

TOP: ANNE M. EBERHARDT; BELOW: GETTY IMAGES

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