

Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association to the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group

Executive Summary

The AVA believes that the critical issues for the veterinary profession are:

- The shortage of practitioners in rural mixed practice
- The need for surveillance for emergency animal diseases, early detection and response
- The maintenance and demonstration of Australia's excellent animal health status
- The highest standards of animal welfare
- Measures to maximise food safety
- Monitoring of the world animal health and welfare scene
- Participation in international standards development to ensure they are relevant to Australia's production systems
- Development of strategic animal health services and participation in quality assurance schemes to maximise food safety
- Maintenance of rigorous and scientifically based risk analysis systems for quarantine and food safety
- Maintenance of a rigorous and conservative quarantine system
- Best practice in animal welfare standards and practice and implementation of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy
- Encouragement of practitioners in government services including the Australian Veterinary Reserve and Accreditation Program for Australian Veterinarians.
- Continuing education and research
- Modern methods of encouraging manufacture of safe food
- Availability of safe and effective veterinary chemicals with best practice guidelines.

Introduction

The AVA is the national body representing the veterinary profession in Australia. The profession is very diverse and this is evidenced by the 23 Special Interest Groups of the Association. The Association feels an obligation to make its vast expertise available in the national interest and in the interest of the animal concerned.

Six of the Special Interest Groups are of particular relevance to the Reference Group. These are

The Special Interest Groups are:

- Australian Cattle Veterinarians Special Interest Group of the AVA
- Australian Sheep Veterinarians SIG of the AVA
- Australian Pig Veterinarians SIG of the AVA
- Australian Association of Veterinary Conservation Biologists
- Australian Camelid Veterinary Association
- Australian Embryo Transfer Society
- Australian Equine Veterinary Association
- Association of Registered Veterinary Specialists
- Australian Veterinary Poultry Alliance
- Australian Veterinarians in Public Health
- Australian Veterinarians in Animal Welfare and Ethics

The AVA maintains close liaison with the **Australian College of Veterinary Scientists**. The College provides postgraduate qualifications through its 17 Chapters. These qualifications provide the basis for registration as specialists in Australia and New Zealand.

The Chapters of the College are:

- Chapter of Pathobiology
- Chapter of Epidemiology
- Chapter of Veterinary Pharmacology
- Chapter on Avian Health
- The Cattle Chapter

This diversity is one of the factors that make competition and mutual recognition important to the veterinary profession.

AVA comments on the relevant sections of the Reference Group issues paper follow:

B. Markets for agriculture and food

3. International markets

While Australian agriculture remains strongly dependent on exports international rules and bilateral agreements on animal health and welfare and food safety and labelling will be critical to the industry.

Farmers and exporters will be under pressure to be competitive while retaining our highly favourable disease status and standards. There will be pressure on animal welfare and pressure to accept imports of some commodities from an increasing number of countries.

Food safety is attracting increasing concern. The use of farm chemicals and veterinary drugs is coming under closer scrutiny giving heightened awareness of the carcinogenic potential of some chemical residues and of antibiotic resistance. Essential chemicals need careful evaluation and where scientifically sound rigorous defence. Much of the debate on use of chemicals has been distorted by emotion and misinformation, careful use of scientific information is needed, particularly in regard to registration and the safety and efficacy of chemicals.

Australia's long term sensitivity to quarantine matters and preservation of biodiversity will no doubt continue and cover a wider range of species and commodities than most countries. Spread of zoonoses like West Nile virus and emergence of new zoonoses overseas (BSE, SARS, Nipah virus and highly pathogenic avian influenza and the spread of West Nile virus) and in Australia (Hendra virus and Australian bat lyssavirus) affect lifestyle matters as well as animal health and food safety.

These challenges require decision-making process that can address actual risks, are based on science and are defensible nationally and internationally. Veterinary Science is deeply involved.

Multilateral trade negotiations

The creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the Uruguay Round and the development of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement established new disciplines in international veterinary matters. The adoption of the Office International des Epizooties Terrestrial Animal Health Code and the Aquatic Animal

Health Code under the SPS Agreement and establishment of the dispute settlement system have confirmed the scientific basis of veterinary matters in trade.

Bilateral trading agreements

Bilateral and regional trade agreements as they relate to animals, their genetic material and products include similarly rigid quarantine / biosecurity elements.

The AVA makes its expertise available through consultations and representations for this work. The AVA Annual Conference with its multiple scientific streams provides a forum for scientific advances and application of veterinary science to policy making process. This work is a valuable tool for liberalising market access.

Australian industry government assists these processes by providing resources, mainly people with expertise to contribute to national and international standards and the risk analyses that allow trade to proceed. It is imperative that Australia continue to contribute to OIE standards setting and to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) particularly to the joint WHO / FAO Codex Alimentarius Commission and food quality and safety standards.

Domestic disease monitoring, surveillance and control and improvements in animal welfare standards through implementation of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy will contribute to this. It is critical for example that Australia demonstrate and justify its position in animal welfare and the extraordinary advances in recent years eg in livestock exports. This is particularly important in matters unique to Australia such as mulesing of sheep and pastoral animal husbandry.

4. Domestic markets

There is evidence that food safety and animal welfare will be critical to the future of agriculture, particularly animal based industries. Increasing urbanisation is changing perceptions of farming and consumer value judgements leading to the need for awareness to be raised of real farm issues.

Affluence and travel are increasing demand for sophisticated and ethnic products, most of which can be produced under Australian conditions. Adaptation of food inspection and safety assurance methods needs ongoing development in industry, policy makers and regulators.

Quality assurance and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point systems, vendor declarations and livestock and product identification allow quality and food safety to be built into the manufacture of foods from the farm to final consumption. Veterinarians play a part in such systems that also include animal health and welfare in the farming systems. This can make as big a contribution as the clinical services they traditionally provide. Movement of the science of meat inspection to address microbiological and contamination is addressing the actual challenges to health. The outbreak of *E coli* 0157H7 in salami that killed and maimed people led to new methods of production and control. Continuing education and research are required to keep industry, veterinarians and other up with developments

Sound science, transparency and consumer choice will be critical to public policy decisions such as the housing of hens and sows where intuitive perceptions are not necessarily demonstrated by science

Organic and genetically modified foods need the same level of awareness and training, and regulation among all players.

The measures to prevent entry or transmission of diseases like BSE and the accompanying variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) pay off even though they seem extreme. Prevention of feeding of animal based feed to ruminant animals, conservative import policies and early detection and response mechanisms are strongly supported by the AVA.

Efficient supply chains are important for competitiveness

Supply chains provide threats and opportunities for animal health and welfare and food safety. They can allow for adulteration on a wider scale but also allow for greater control “from paddock to plate” through QA and HACCP and self-regulation along the supply chain. Compliance and regulatory mechanisms need to keep pace with and complement these systems.

Australian food producers and regulators have to adopt new skills and practices.

Balancing market power

6. Education, skills and labour supply

The Review of Rural Veterinary Services completed by Mr Peter Frawley in 2003 indicated that the farm community was not generally aware of the services veterinarians can provide to improve animal production, animal welfare and food safety. Rather farmers generally see veterinarians as providers only of clinical services that are not always justified when stock prices are low.

The report also sought to address the shortage of veterinarians in mixed rural practice, in part by increasing awareness of farmers and by training veterinarians in strategic production veterinary services and in provision of services to government and in QA schemes. The AVA suggestion of relief from payment of HECS for veterinarians who went into mixed practice in areas classified as rural under the Rural and Regional Area Classification Scheme was not accepted. The Scheme forms the basis of some medical schemes.

The Frawley Recommendation for an Australian Veterinary Reserve (AVR) (based on an AVA government meeting to capture the experiences of veterinary practitioners sent under an AVA scheme to assist with foot and mouth disease in UK in 2001).was accepted by the government. Currently training of 100 Veterinary Reservists is underway. They will participate in control of emergency disease (EAD) outbreaks and in EAD surveillance designed to demonstrate Australia’s disease status to foreign governments and for early detection of EADs.

Government veterinarians and private practitioners are being trained to implement AUSVETPLAN to handle outbreaks of EADs.

Private practitioners are being trained under the Accreditation Program for Australian Veterinarians (APAV) to handle certification and other work previously undertaken by government staff. Some are training to be Accredited Veterinarians to work preparation of animals and on ships in the live export trade. APAV details are on the Animal Health Australia website www.aahc.com.au

Australian veterinary schools are training graduates for rural farm animal practice to meet the demands of the rural industries. The new school at Charles Sturt University has chosen its students partly on experience with farm animals.

The Frawley Review also recommended development of a new animal health information system and greater access to laboratories for diagnostic work of strategic importance and surveillance.

Continuing education is becoming compulsory for veterinarians in Australia. The AVA has established AVA VetED to assist members to address CVE needs and record CVE points. CVE will facilitate training to assist the initiatives described in this submission.

7. Research, development, innovation and technology

Research into farm animal and aquatic needs is ongoing and needs continuing support to maintain its level of priority. The Australian Animal Health Laboratory, as one example is doing research on diagnostic methods for EADs and is installing robotics to enable thousands of diagnostic samples to be analysed daily during an outbreak of an EAD. This was identified as a need during the UK FMD outbreak in 2001.

Funding research and development

“Public good” and “community service obligation” funding is needed for some research and development.

Diagnostic work in state laboratories that may be linked with EADs needs to be maintained and costs socialised. Surveillance for antibiotic resistance also has national implications and needs to be met by government.

Veterinary drugs and chemicals are needed in the aquatic animal industries but amounts used do not justify the costs of registration. Efforts have been made to socialise these costs to make the chemicals available. Currently some unregistered chemicals are prescribed off-label by veterinarians but this entails some difficulties and risks.

Some research is currently funded through R&D corporations and industry service companies.

Technology adoption

Biotechnology

Much of the debate regarding animals is potential consumption of genetically manipulated plants.

Biotechnology has enabled considerable gains in rapid and sensitive diagnostic tests. This has not caused controversy.

Transport

The OIE has four animal welfare working groups, one is addressing road transport and one sea transport. Transport systems are critical in animal agriculture but attract significant animal welfare controversy. Australian conditions and vast distances require different approaches to those of Europe and North America. Australia needs to argue its case in international bodies to have the major advances and outcomes based welfare approaches to be accepted nationally and internationally.

International time limits to travel would be unworkable in Australia.

Australia needs to maintain its transport initiatives in local and international travel. The development of the “Hot Stuff” heat stress model to address the risks of sea transport through loading densities based on environmental concerns is but example.

Communications

The internet has allowed email transfer for diagnostic images and material results and instant communication to make certification more timely and secure. *These systems must be maintained and expanded.*

Water

9. Biosecurity and quarantine

Mention has been made of the WTO and the SPS Agreement and their use of the OIE Codes. Australia has participated in development of the Codes and has formed alliances with like countries.

Great efforts have been made to make import risk analysis scientific and transparent. As national and internal systems have become more sophisticated it has become more difficult to finalise these analyses and this is resulting in challenges in the WTO. The AVA is prepared to continue contribution of expertise and experts.

Currently biosecurity risks are high with emerging disease and increased international travel and trade and political unrest.

Individual farm biosecurity eg of poultry farms against free flying birds is being linked to availability of compensation to the farmer when EADs occur. Farm biosecurity is increasingly important to food safety and animal health.

Barrier services at ports of entry need to be based on a risk analysis / risk management approach.

While a no risk policy is not feasible conservative science based policy is. Attention to stochastic risk analysis helps explain risks and risk management processes. This should be continued. Public investment in these processes and contribution to international standards setting is warranted.

Quarantine is linked with surveillance and early detection and response mechanisms. The national livestock identification scheme is crucial to this approach and needs to be achieved in appropriate form for all forms of animal production.

10. Natural resource management

The AVA is interested in native and introduced species. We have a particular interest in control of feral pigs following a resolution at a recent AGM. Our concerns are related, in short, to environmental damage, threats to native species of animals and plants, costs of control, costs to agriculture eg in lamb predation and spread of disease and the welfare of the pigs in measures used to control them. These concerns have been raised with the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee in its Inquiry into the "Impact on Agriculture of Invasive Species" and the Senate Committee on the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts "Turning back the tide - the invasive species challenge". Our views are available in the Hansard records of those committees.

AVA respects the value of feral pig meat products and has no objections to their harvest provided it is humane, nor its contribution to their control. However that trade is not justification for reducing pressure on feral pig populations.

Role of farm businesses in environmental management

The AVA welcomes the setting aside by farmers of corridors and reserves and growing of trees for the protection of native animals.

Achieving natural resource management benefits

How should government investment in natural resource management be best targeted?

What is the most effective and efficient way to establish spending priorities across and within regions?

Climate variability and change

E. Rural and regional communities

11. Rural businesses and communities

AVA surveys indicate that personal factors tend to have the greatest influence on the shortage of veterinarians in rural mixed practice. Difficulties of attracting professionals to small towns are changing the nature of towns and, from our perspective leaving serious gaps in services and monitoring for disease as required for trade and early recognition and control. The AVR, APAV and other initiatives seek to address some factors. There is justification in applying resources to towns for social and agricultural reasons.

Changing nature of farming

Modern farming methods and more intensive animal enterprises, such as feedlots create greater animal health and welfare and food safety risks. Use of veterinary chemicals is increasingly required the needs greater attention to feed stuffs and to chemical withdrawal periods and professionalism in prescribing. Livestock identification, QA systems and vendor declarations assist.

AVA has developed Guidelines for Prescribing and Dispensing and for the use of antibiotics in animals to assist veterinarians with these responsibilities.

The Neumann report on animal welfare codes and standards addresses these matters and will assist in responding to community concerns for the welfare of animals as distinct from the avoidance of cruelty. Approval of chemicals is sophisticated and systems are considered best practice.

Implications of change for rural communities

Governments and adjustment to change

*Australian Veterinary Association
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