

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Horsing around? Not with Hendra virus risk management

Dr Melanie Taylor from the Centre for Health Research, Drs Navneet Dhand and Jenny-Ann Toribio from the University of Sydney, Drs Nina Kung and Hume Field from Queensland Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases and Dr Barbara Moloney and Dr Therese Wright from the NSW Department of Primary Industries are undertaking a three-year research project to investigate the knowledge, attitudes and biosecurity practices of horse owners in relation to Hendra virus. This multidisciplinary project is part of the National Hendra Virus Research Program which is funded by the Commonwealth of Australia and the States of New South Wales and Queensland. The project is contracted by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

'Hendra virus is having an impact beyond the immediate and tragic loss of life,' says Dr Taylor. 'A combination of high human mortality, no medical cure or human vaccine, and transmission through animals with which people often have a very close bond has heightened awareness and resulted in Hendra virus being a major concern for horse owners, and those who care for horses.' Our project aims to ensure "horse people" are central to research and policy development on this evolving and uncertain threat.

Hendra virus is found in fruit bats and is a zoonotic disease, which means it can transfer from animals to people. It can be transmitted from bat to horse, horse to horse, and horse to human. The virus can cause a range of clinical symptoms in horses, notably respiratory and/or neurological signs, and the death rate is high (75%). Infection in humans is rare, and is linked to very close contact with an infected horse.



The flexible framework of the study takes account of the dynamic situation surrounding Hendra virus. The past few years have seen rises in the number of cases (including in NSW in 2013) as well as increased strategies available to reduce the risk of infection – for example, through property management and, since late 2012, a horse vaccine.

Dr Taylor's team is part-way through tracking a large national cohort of horse owners. They aim to develop a resource to monitor changes in risk awareness, risk mitigation practices, and the effectiveness and reach of communications from industry and government agencies.

Project Title: Longitudinal cohort study of horse owners (also known as Horse owners and Hendra virus: A Longitudinal study to Evaluate Risk (HHALTER))

Funding has been set at: \$308,081

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February 2014