Risk Communication Between Veterinarians & Horse Owners: A Key Factor in the Management of Hendra Virus
Diana Mendez¹, Ken Miller², Jenni Judd¹ & Rick Speare¹

**Background**
Hendra virus (HeV): high occupational risk
- A rare zoonosis
- High mortality rate in Humans (57%) & Horses (75%)

**Workplace health & safety legislation:**
- Private vets responsible for the health and safety of all people present at the time of the consultation
- Australian risk & danger assessment management change
- Communicate risk & dangers with veterinary clients

**Qualitative Study**
Consultation with veterinary personnel about:
- HeV risks perceptions
- Barriers to & enablers of IC in private practice

**AIM**
Gain a deeper understanding of the IC & related HeV issues equine veterinarians experienced

**We report on a particular recurrent theme:**
Risk communication difficulties between vets & horse owners and their affect on veterinary IC and HeV management in private veterinary practice

**Results**

**Participants reported that:**
- Some horse owners were unresponsive to HeV risks warnings
- Some horse owners refused to comply with veterinary safety instructions
- Some horse owners refused to have their horses tested for HeV because of cost
- Some horse owners refused to have their horses tested for HeV because of mandatory euthanasia of the positive animals

“I find great difficulty dealing with owners because it is a power play and ultimately we are responsible of the safety of all involved, but some owners don’t believe that, which complicates the legal situation. We usually end up taking risks out of concern for the welfare of the animal but we end with less authority over the handling of the horse.”
(Participant 4)

**Consequently, horse owners’ lack of compliance with veterinary health & safety instructions was viewed as:**
- A barrier to good veterinary infection control
- A barrier to adequate management of potential case of HeV
- A barrier to biosecurity & public health
- Increasing OHS for veterinary staff and bystanders
- Increasing OHS liability

**Participats’ strategies to address risk communication difficulties with horse owners:**
- Explaining to horse owners confidently and authoritatively about HeV risks to human health & the benefits of compliance with veterinary safety instructions
- Bringing own trained assistance
- Declining horse owner assistance if he/she refuses to comply with veterinary safety instructions
- Moving proceedings to clinical veterinary premises to gain control of the safety situation
- Refusing to deal with a horse unless the owner complies with safety instructions
- Documenting proceedings

**Conclusion**
Veterinarians need to be aware of the infection control, OHS and legal issues associated with clients & potential HeV cases and develop strategies to mitigate communication risks with clients

Some veterinarians may need training or coaching in effective client management strategies to ensure client compliance with veterinary infection control instructions

Additional sources of information for clients about HeV may also improve their understanding of the risks involved & motivate their compliance with veterinary instructions

**Disclosure of financial interest:**
Funding for this paper was supported by Australia’s Biomedical, Comparative and Parasitology Centre for Emerging Infections Diseases & Arthropods by the Asia–Pacific Centre for Public Health and Tropical Medicine.