

MANAGING INFECTIOUS DISEASES AT A RACETRACK

C. Kunz

Thoroughbred and Harness Equine Racetrack Practice; Meadowlands Racetrack, East Rutherford, New Jersey; Aqueduct Racetrack, Ozone Park, New York; and Belmont Park, Elmont Park, New York, USA

In recent years, several major Thoroughbred racetracks in the eastern USA were faced with infectious disease outbreaks. This discussion recommends management practices that reduce the risk of infectious disease outbreaks and strategies to protect the resident population against the introduction of disease from outside populations.

The operational plan at the track of disease origin must be assessed. If disease recognition is early and appropriate bio-security precautions taken, the focus should be on assessing the possibility of potential disease emerging in the non-quarantined stable area. An initial response of suspending or slowing the movement of horses permitted to enter your premises from the affected track allows time for information to be reviewed and additional cases to emerge, which would elevate the risk of the track's non-clinical population.

The epidemiological pattern is entirely different for each disease, so the approach in managing a horse disease outbreak depends on several factors, including the health risks of the specific disease, mode of transmission, typical incubation time, transmission potential, virulence, number of horses and barns affected, bio-security and vigilance observed at the affected track.

Preparations should be reviewed with track management in the event that cases emerge at your own track. Horses exhibiting neurological signs, abscessing lymph nodes, and fevers of unknown origin should be reported to the regulatory veterinarian. Early reporting of unusual or suspicious illness is imperative.

Horses with clinical signs consistent with potential infectious disease should be removed to an isolation barn or equine hospital, if possible. Restrictions of all horses' movement and training in the suspect barn may be necessary until a definitive diagnosis is made. A detailed history on every horse, including recent travel, must be explored. Emergence of another sick horse may dictate quarantine. The remaining horses in the barn are considered to be exposed and at high risk. Horses of trainers in overflow barns must be closely scrutinised.

The use of temperature charts is a good indicator of impending disease and should be encouraged in the rest of the stable area. The level of bio-security at the racetrack must be elevated. Disinfection of communal areas and equipment demonstrates a commitment of the racetrack to the protection of naive horses against infectious disease.

Horsemen must be notified of the discovery of infectious disease. Along with veterinary recommendations, the announcement should include what disease is suspected, what actions are being taken and what cooperation is required. Travel restrictions and testing regimes are inconvenient and costly and meet with less resistance if those affected understand the implications of the disease. Websites are excellent tools to reach horsemen with stables off track and can serve as a primary information source.

Success in managing a horse disease emergency depends on awareness, understanding the immediate threat, a practical plan with continuity, and a team-oriented approach.