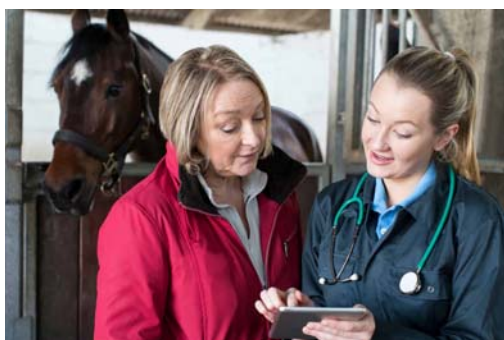


Switzerland Revives Voluntary Equine Disease Surveillance System

Switzerland's internet-based voluntary system is a way for veterinarians to report equine infections, such as influenza and herpesvirus, even if they aren't required to by law.

By Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA | May 22, 2018 | Diseases and Conditions, Infectious Diseases, More Diseases & Conditions, Neurologic Disease, Respiratory Problems, Welfare and Industry



Switzerland's Internet-based voluntary system is a way for veterinarians to report equine infections, such as influenza and herpesvirus, even if they aren't required to by law. | Photo: iStock

Infectious diseases can spread quickly. But knowing about outbreaks helps curb epidemics and keep more horses safe.

That's why Switzerland is joining the ranks of a few select other countries offering an internet-based voluntary reporting system. It's a way for veterinarians to report infections, such as influenza and herpesvirus, even if they aren't required to by law. The reporting makes the information public for the entire country

to see and react accordingly.

"Most of the diseases we see are the non-notifiable ones, so there's a real need to have a look at these endemic diseases in our horse population in order to keep them under control," said Franziska Remy-Wohlfender, DrMetVet, Dipl. ECVPH, a specialist in equine practice at the University of Bern Vetsuisse Faculty's Swiss Institute of Equine Medicine, in Switzerland.

Notifiable diseases are those practitioners are required by law to report to authorities if they diagnose them. In Switzerland as well as most developed countries, these include such diseases as equine infectious anemia (EIA), equine viral arteritis (EVA), West Nile virus, African horse sickness (AHS), various forms of encephalitis (Eastern, Western, and Venezuelan), and contagious equine metritis (CEM).

However, many epidemics occur through the spread of more common infectious diseases such as herpesvirus, strangles, and piroplasmiasis. All these conditions are considered endemic in Switzerland, Remy-Wohlfender said.

“Controlling their progression is significantly facilitated when we know where the infections are,” she said.

Inspired by the success of the Epidemiological Surveillance Network for Equine Diseases in France, Switzerland relaunched its Equinella voluntary reporting program for equine infectious diseases in 2013. It had existed as a paper-form reporting system since 1990. But after about 2000, few veterinarians used it, making the overall surveillance of diseases not very useful anymore, Remy-Wohlfender said.

Since 2013, however, researchers at the University of Bern, the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office, and the Swiss Association of Equine Veterinarians have been concentrating their efforts on “reviving” Equinella, Remy-Wohlfender said. They’ve created a user-friendly reporting website and improved communication and education about the system. They’ve even tried special incentives such as offering free mobile phones to practitioners who sign on to the program and report diseases through the Equinella online application.

In the end, however, they realize that the strongest sources of motivation are the practitioners’ personal sense of professionalism and their status within the Swiss equine industry, said Remy-Wohlfender.

“It seems like the main incentive is just good veterinary practice,” she said. “Their cases get reported and communicated, and that matters to them, knowing they’ve participated in managing the spread of disease.

“But it’s also good for their reputation,” she added. “We now have a list of participating veterinarians on the Equinella website. And clients look at that. It’s a reflection on the veterinarian’s work ethic; it’s important to horse owners looking for serious veterinary care.”

Since Remy-Wohlfender and her fellow researchers relaunched Equinella, approximately 60% of the Swiss equine population is covered by the approximately 94 participating veterinarians, she said.

“It’s great progress, but it’s still not enough,” Remy-Wohlfender said. “We’re still trying to recruit more veterinarians.”

With only 111,152 horses in the entire country (as of Feb. 28, according to the official Swiss equine registry), Remy-Wohlfender said Switzerland stands out as a leader in voluntary equine disease reporting. “Having that centralized information about equine diseases throughout an entire country means better management, better research, and ultimately better horse health.”

The study, “[Experiences with a voluntary surveillance system for early detection of equine diseases in Switzerland](#),” was published in *Epidemiology and Infection*.

