

Progeny, passports and phenylbutazone

REFLECTING on some of the many current issues affecting our profession gave me a chance to update myself on figures and legislation.

The debate regarding the effects of the economic situation on veterinary practice continues to rage and the feeling is clients are spending less on their animals. The investigation into horse DNA found within meat products continues and is likely to raise ongoing questions regarding horse identification, food safety, drug residues and the responsibilities of the vet.

Economic effects on breeding

Owners are reducing the numbers of mares they are breeding each year. It seems they are aware of the expense, especially when veterinary intervention is required. The feeling is that the market for mid-range horses is saturated so selling youngstock is proving harder too.

To see if this perception is a true reflection of the UK breeding industry, I looked at foal registrations during the past four years. For the professional industry, I used the figures of Weatherbys and for the leisure industry I reviewed foal registrations of one of the breed societies. While these are only two of the bodies owners can choose to register foals with, both show a decrease in numbers of foal registrations during the period of 2009 to 2012, as shown in Table 1. I can only assume this is a reflection of the entire industry, especially as it seems to concur with client feelings.

Interestingly, the numbers of foal checks our practice completed over this period has stayed relatively constant. This may reflect that the people who continue to breed horses are still concerned regarding the health of their foals and are committed to spending money on veterinary treatment.

Horse passport regulations

Since 2004, the Horse Passports (England) Regulations have meant owners require a passport for every horse. This has also been adopted by Scotland and Wales, theoretically enabling positive identifica-

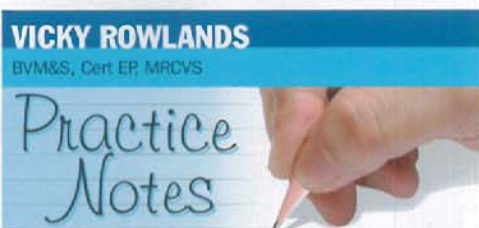


TABLE 1. Foal registrations 2009-2012

Year	Foals registered with Weatherbys	Foals registered with the Highland Pony Society
2009	5,995	435
2010	4,665	402
2011	4,635	372
2012	4,366	281

tion of every horse in the UK. Unfortunately, many owners did not comply and monitoring of this scheme continues to be limited.

In July 2009, the regulations were altered to improve identification and prevent unsuitable equidae entering the human food chain. These regulations apply to all EU member states as the EU deems horses to be a food-producing animal. The only exceptions to the passport regulations are feral or semi-feral horses within areas of Dartmoor, Exmoor, the New Forest and Wales.

After 2009, any new passport applications had to be accompanied by evidence of an electronic identification microchip inserted by a veterinary surgeon. Some passport issuing organisations (PIOs) only require confirmation of a microchip before they will issue a passport; others also require the silhouette to be completed. Arguably, this latter method is preferable as a quick visual check of the horse can confirm its identification without need for a microchip scanner – not all vets carry a scanner when treating horses in an emergency.

Applications for foal passports must be completed within six months of birth or by December 31 in the year they are born, whichever is later. If the application is made after this time, then the PIO is responsible for signing that the animal is not suitable for human consumption. If any non-passport horse is found to have a microchip already inserted, checks should be made to try

to locate any previously issued passport. As there are so many PIOs, and no central database of passports, this becomes a logistical nightmare for the client. Assuming no passport is found, a replacement can then be issued. Again, this should arrive with part two of section nine signed by the PIO.

Clients should be reminded the passport is not proof of ownership, although every horse sold must be accompanied by a passport and any ownership changes should be registered with the PIO within 30 days. Current advice from DEFRA is that vendors of horses without a passport should be reported to the local trading standards office. As this guidance depends on clients being aware of the recommendations and then acting on them, it seems horses will continue to be traded without passports available. This is especially likely in the case of novice purchasers who do not have a pre-purchase examination carried out.

Horses should be accompanied by their passport at all times and it should be available at the time of veterinary treatment. In certain situations, there are exceptions; however, the passport should be made available within three hours if required. Yard owners and trainers should be made aware that keeping a horse without a passport is an offence.

Our responsibilities as vets

As vets, we are required to check the passport to ensure the correct animal is presented before medicating the horse.

If any medication is given that is unsuitable for the human food chain, part two of section nine must be signed by the owner. The veterinary surgeon has authority to sign this section if the owner is unavailable. Once this is signed the decision cannot be reversed. Although part two of section nine usually has a section for the owner and one for a competent counter-

signatory to complete, BEVA is reminding vets that counter-signing is not required – one signature on that section permanently excludes that animal from the human food chain.

If there is any doubt about the status of the animal, then only medication suitable for entering the human food chain should be used, although vets are allowed to use one of the banned medications if the welfare of the horse will become compromised. Written details of any treatments given should then be provided to the keeper of the horse, including the vet's name and date, animal identification, the product and its batch number, the amount administered and the relevant withdrawal period. BEVA provides a standard form detailing this information although there are probably few practices routinely using this.

Once in possession of these details, the owner or keeper is then responsible for recording this information in the passport or signing to exclude the animal from human consumption as appropriate. If the horse is euthanised or dies, the owner should be reminded to return the passport to the PIO within 30 days.

Although phenylbutazone is the most commonly publicised medication that automatically excludes the animal from the human food chain, it must be remembered there are other medications within this category. These drugs include aristolochia (and preparations thereof), chloramphenicol, chloroform, chlorpromazine, colchicine, dapsone, dimetridazole, metronidazole and nitrofurans (including furazolidone). Metronidazole is probably the only other drug in this group that is used in equine practice with any regularity.

If the regulations above are adhered to, how does phenylbutazone enter the human food chain and what is its significance? Even if every passport was checked each time medication was prescribed to a horse, and every horse was accompanied by its original passport throughout its life, it is likely system failures would still occur.

These issues require addressing, as phenylbutazone has been discovered in corned beef in a popular superstore. This was identified at four parts per billion (ppb). There have also been instances of phenylbutazone being identified in horse carcasses destined for human consumption; the highest recorded level at the time of writing is 1,900ppb.

It seems to be virtually impossible to eat enough horse meat with this level of contamination to reach the human dose



A foal at grass.

range, although in the interests of human food safety it must be remembered that phenylbutazone is not routinely used in human medicine due to the range and severity of associated side effects.

To address this situation and maintain the integrity of the veterinary profession, we must endeavour to check every passport before medication or prescription of any of the relevant drugs.

This may mean each practice needs to find a way to record that a passport has been checked for a horse and have this information available to each vet at the time of examination and treatment. As an alternative, each time one of these medications is dispensed, written instructions could be given to the horse owner or keeper informing him or her of the requirement to complete part two of section nine. This solution seems to be in conflict with the current trend towards a paperless society.

Some problems may still be

found due to the provision of prescriptions for completion by internet pharmacies – probably, in this instance, both prescribing vet and dispensing company should be providing written instructions informing owners of their responsibilities. In the case of oral preparations, the simplest option may be for the manufacturers to put a printed notice on the front of each box of phenylbutazone stating that use of the product deems the animal unfit for human consumption and the relevant section of the passport must be signed. This would also circumnavigate the problem of owners using medication on horses for which it was not originally prescribed. If we can improve the situation regarding use of these medications, we are less likely to lose vital drugs from our armoury of treatment options.

● Thanks to Weatherbys and The Highland Pony Society for their foal registration figures.

References

DEFRA, VMD and FSA websites. ■



Identification methods.

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