

Changes in Surveillance: a Risk for Animal Disease Protection?

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ANALYSIS - The Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratory Agency (AHVLA) in the UK last week announced plans to streamline the surveillance of new and re-emerging animal disease threats, writes Chris Harris.

The reform of the surveillance system was described by the AHVLA as a system “to improve both geographical and species specific coverage of disease surveillance across England and Wales by making better use of the expertise and resources of private vets, universities and the livestock industry”.

The agency said that the move follows recommendations from the Surveillance Advisory Group. The emphasis on the change has been on the improvements that the new system will bring to the arena.

It will place a greater emphasis on gathering intelligence from other sources of surveillance intelligence, and places less emphasis on post-mortems carried out at government laboratories. However, the change in tack by the agency and the government will see the closure of half of the 14 current disease surveillance centres around the country and a cut in the numbers of vets employed by the government in disease surveillance from 44 to 35 and a cut in the support staff from 45 to 30. The AHVLA says that the net present value of the new model over a 10-year period will be about £8.2 million with break-even in Year 3.

While ostensibly the reason for the reorganisation is to provide a new focus to disease surveillance, by outsourcing much of the work to private vets and to universities and by cutting staff and freeing up offices and labs and real estate that can be sold, the hidden motive seems to be more of a cost-cutting exercise.

The agency itself says there is a need for pilot studies to “assess the practicality and effectiveness of this change of methodology”.

And it also recognises that there are risks in the way the new system has been structured.

The Agency says in the notification of the changes: “There are known and accepted risks in implementation of this model, in particular if stakeholders fail to engage with AHVLA, or if practitioners and farmers fail to develop local solutions to the need for private vet diagnostic PME or make use of the diagnostic service. The impact of these will be mitigated by continuation of an expert advice and diagnostic system along with phased introduction of the new model with training and on-going assessment.

“There is a risk that other providers of expert gross pathology will decide not to become part of the surveillance system. However all the Veterinary Schools need a throughput of carcasses for teaching purposes and initial discussions with many of them have been very positive. Private vets and the fallen stock industry may choose not to offer a PME service to farmers. However in the public consultation many vets said that if they could access appropriate training it is work they would be very keen to undertake. Discussions with the fallen stock industry have also been very positive.

“A reduction in AHVLA staff and facilities will have an impact, albeit small, on the agency’s ability to mount a response to a major disease outbreak.”

The move to a new model has already brought criticism from one section of the veterinary field – the Royal College of Pathologists.

Dr Archie Prentice, President of The Royal College of Pathologists, said: “The current surveillance system is a success. It protects public and animal health and breeds confidence in a multi-billion pound livestock industry. The savings made in these proposed cuts are small compared to the health and financial risks they bring.

“If dismantled, the expertise, knowledge and trusted collaboration with farmers and veterinary surgeons could be lost. It is essential that any cost saving should not be at the expense of consumer safety, confidence in the livestock industry or animal welfare.”

“We should be looking for ways to sustain and improve expertise in veterinary pathology. In common with the majority of respondents to the Surveillance 2014 consultation, we fear the current proposals - which seem to be based on unfounded opinions and untested assumptions - are likely to damage it.”

The purpose of the surveillance carried out by the AHVLA is to provide high quality intelligence on animal health and welfare to enable farmers, the veterinary profession and governments to take decisions which can improve animal health, welfare and productivity.

It provides data that allows threats to public health, trade, and wider society from animal diseases such as BSE, Schmallenberg, Classical Swine Fever and Foot and Mouth Disease to be identified and managed.

While there may be need for modernisation and cost control, the AHVLA needs to reassure the industry, the veterinary sector and the public that the new model will be able to deliver the security, information and protection required.

A drop in security could lead to untold damage to the livestock sector - and not only in the UK.