

Regular Testing Ensures Health At The Sale Barn

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NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — In only a short time on a typical Monday, Dr. Jim Holt may press a stethoscope to a horse's side, stop to answer a horse owner's question, consult his clipboard to search for a number, answer the phone, and consult his clipboard again.

Finding a number not crossed off, he'll begin again a search for a horse — in between answering more questions or checking results at the laboratory on the premises.

A veterinarian who works at New Holland Sales Stables every Monday, Holt is in charge of administering the

Coggins test to horses sold at the auction.

Holt also checks horses to decide whether they are legal to sell. He checks body condition and evaluates lameness, wounds, blindness in both eyes, and debilitating diseases.

"Essentially what we're trying to do is interpret Pennsylvania's animal cruelty law," said Holt.

"Things have improved dramatically at the sale barn in the last several years," he said. "We don't see the problematic horses as frequently."

Also the relationship between the SPCA and the sale barn has improved, according to Holt.



In the spring, 200-300 horses may be auctioned off every Monday. Holt and his assistants administer the Coggins test to 40-100 of those horses. This requires drawing blood, as Holt demonstrates here.

"Although people may believe that this is a slaughter-only sale, on average 10 percent or less of the horses go to slaughter," he said.

Testing For EIA

Mandatory for horses coming to the auction from outside of Pennsylvania, the test is for equine infectious anemia (EIA), a viral disease. Pennsylvania does not require Coggins testing on in-state horse transactions.

Owners of horses coming in from outside of Pennsylvania are responsible, if their horse has not already been tested, to have the horse Coggins tested at the sales stable.

Owners of a newly-purchased horse may also opt to pay the \$20 to have their horse tested, since the test is required, for example, to participate in shows. They can find out results in two hours.

Although EIA "is not common compared to the number of tests that we run," according to Holt, "there is no vaccine and there is no treatment," so the test is important.

However, "we've only had two positives since we started the lab three years ago," he said.

Biting insects — usually flies — spread the disease, in addition to a needle used on an infected horse and then used on an uninfected animal.

Holt arrives at the sale barn a half hour before the sale starts to go through the list of horses consigned "to decide who needs tested and who doesn't," he said.

Arriving early also allows him to "go through while the horses are somewhat stationary," although with horses continually being checked in

or taken through the ring, finding the horses on his list is a challenge.

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Technician Amber Wiedler also helps to find the horses and draw blood. Paperwork for each horse includes recording the horse's number, breed, age, sex, and markings.

In The Lab

Lab technician Carol Stevens runs two different Coggins tests in the laboratory located on sales stable grounds. The ELISA test results are ready in only hours, while the agar test takes 24-48 hours to run.

Stevens runs the Enzyme Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) test on most of the samples. However horses going to New Jersey, which does not accept ELISA test results, are given the agar test.

According to Stevens, "the ELISA test takes a very small amount of serum," which is separated from the blood samples by a centrifuge. This allows Stevens to test the serum which rises to the top.

Although approximately 70 percent of his job is administering the Coggins test, Holt may also examine horses as they are checked in to the sale barn for possible problems.

He also may evaluate horses that have already been sold, since a horse may be resold "if the owner finds something they can't live with," he said.

Holt is part of Brandywine Veterinary Services, a four-veterinarian practice based in Coatesville. He also works with the dairy cattle at New Holland Sales Stables on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.



Lab technician Carol Stevens runs two Coggins tests in the laboratory. Here she prepares for the agar test, which takes 24-48 hours to run.



Although most of his job is administering Coggins tests, Holt may also evaluate horses for illnesses, such as this pony.



The ELISA test is run in batches. Stevens can test from one sample to "as many as I can keep track of," she said.