Research and Postgraduate

Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health

2002-2006

Faculty of Veterinary Science
FACULTY REPORT

FARM ANIMAL and VETERINARY PUBLIC HEALTH

Introduction

I would like to present this annual report on research and post graduate activity in Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health on behalf of the Faculty of Veterinary Science, and commend the commitment and activity of the large group of people who have contributed so much during the period 2002-2006.

Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health encompasses both teaching and research, and links these to provide the greatest possible benefit for the community. The undergraduate teaching outcomes are to be covered in a separate report from the Learning and Teaching Committee, and this report focuses on the achievements in research, post graduate coursework and post graduate research. It covers a full five years, and our intention is to use this way of reporting so that interested people and prospective students gain a meaningful view of our activities over a reasonable time frame.

Academics and support staff in Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health form a critical mass and are able to provide service to the community across many species, industries and scientific disciplines. We work extensively with collaborators from other institutions and the private sector both in Australia and overseas. We have a large network of contacts in government, industry, academia and business and strive to ensure that our work is relevant and meets current and future community need.

In this report we provide a brief biography for each member of academic staff, and a project outline for their research projects. Most have been funded through external competitive research grants, which illustrates the calibre of the projects. We place high value on our post graduate students as they will be future leaders, and a summary of each of their projects is also included. Overall, there have been many scientific publications and conference proceedings from our work, a further measure of success, and these are listed in the report.

Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health includes the traditional disciplines of veterinary medicine, epidemiology, state veterinary medicine, infectious diseases and public health. Each of the traditional and some emerging farm animal species and industries is also included: sheep, cattle, other ruminants, pigs, chickens and aquatic animals. To cover so much the Faculty has made significant investments in staff and because of its commitment to the production animal industries it will continue to play a key leadership role in ensuring animal health professionals have the skills needed to support and strengthen Australia’s livestock industries and public health.

In 2006 the Faculty made two key academic staff appointments – both new positions funded by the University. The first is in Aquatic Animal Health and Production, a growing need for Australia to meet ambitious government and industry targets to create a $2.5 billion aquaculture industry by 2010. The position will also enable the University to address sustainability and environmental issues associated with aquatic animal health, and create a specific unit of study in aquaculture for undergraduate students. In 2007 we will welcome Dr Joy Becker from Canada to this new role.

The second new position is a Senior Lecturer in Veterinary Pathology, with an emphasis on farm animals. This is to meet urgent needs in training veterinary pathologists to underpin Australia’s unique animal health reputation. Dr Michelle Dennis, a specialist veterinary pathologist from the United States will join the Faculty in 2007 to develop new programs in pathology for both undergraduate and post graduate students, and lead new research programs in farm animal health.
The Faculty has identified an expanding range of opportunities available for veterinary graduates of the 21st century. From 2000, the Faculty moved strategically to rebuild its core teaching and research expertise and received strong industry support for this. With funding from Meat and Livestock Australia a Chair in Farm Animal Health was created. This Chair is a key investment for the Faculty and its industry partner, providing the leadership needed to push forward major research programs and stimulate the interest of undergraduate students in production animal veterinary science and public health. This has led to a rapidly expanding portfolio and so the Faculty is about to begin a vital new partnership with industry to establish a new Chair in Veterinary Public Health and Food Safety. Building capacity in these fields is critical for the long-term viability of the farm animal sector. A new professor will be appointed in 2007 to lead this initiative with support from Meat and Livestock Australia.

A selection of our significant achievements is outlined here and more details can be found in other sections of the report.

**Veterinary Public Health Management Program**

The VPHMgt program was conceived in 2002, planned and developed very carefully to meet the needs of post graduate students, employers and the community. By 2006 there were 63 postgraduate students in the new program, which is designed to equip animal health professionals with technical and other skills needed to support the livestock sector and to become leaders. Leadership and project management are key components of the program which also covers epidemiology, food safety, risk analysis, surveillance, hazards to human and animal health, wildlife epidemiology and much more. International students enrich the program and extend the network of animal health professionals for the benefit of our industries. A unique feature of the program is its on-line classroom that enables students from remote areas to participate, and short residential workshops ensure that an academic community is established and students participate in a traditional face-to-face environment for key units of study in leadership and project management. Feedback from both students and employers has been very encouraging, and we are confident that the community is receiving long term benefits from the program. The program won a prestigious national education award in 2006.

**Investment in infrastructure**

The University of Sydney has made a strategic investment of $2.1M to renovate the JL Shute Building at Camden to accommodate the new farm animal and veterinary public health team together with researchers in technologies that underpin animal health and production. State of the art laboratories, including biosecurity laboratories for study of infectious diseases and molecular biology facilities were opened in October 2003. Technology available includes flow cytometry, SELDI mass spectrometry, other proteomics technologies, quantitative real time PCR, laser capture microdissection, and more.

**Major research program in Johne’s Disease**

In the most concerted effort yet to come to grips with a complex and frustrating disease, the Faculty has joined with Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) to undertake intensive research into Ovine Johne’s Disease (OJD), a devastating and ultimately fatal disease of sheep already entrenched in southeastern Australia. MLA provided a large grant to support research focused on the early diagnosis of infection. This complemented other grants to enable a comprehensive on-farm and laboratory-based research program. As this is such a complex and difficult disease, quarantine restrictions have failed to halt its spread, the sheep industry has been polarised in its views on control options and the newly released vaccine does not fully prevent infection. The lack of basic knowledge about the disease is hindering the design of improved tests, treatment and vaccines. The MLA grant has enabled a team of four leading post doctoral scientists and additional research students to be established to study the basics of Johne’s infection. The latest genomics and proteomics technology will be applied to the problem, and over three years it is hoped that discoveries will be made leading to tests capable of detecting the infection before it has had a chance to spread.
Aquatic Animal Health
There is a national goal for Australia to increase aquaculture production three fold to $2.5 billion by 2010. Leadership in teaching and research in aquatic animal health is on the Faculty’s agenda with a vertically integrated program of study in the BVSc curriculum and a 6 cp unit in the BAnVetBioSc degree. This provides the background and motivation for students to continue in higher degree research pathways. Aquatic animal epidemiology is included as a unit of study in the Veterinary Public Health Management post graduate program and aquatic disease research was made available for the first time in 2004 to students in the BSc(vet) program, a one year full-time research stream within the BVSc curriculum. The Faculty is well-connected to the aquatic animal industries through national and international research projects, participation in the National Aquatic Animal Health Technical Working Group which advises government and the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation Scientific Advisory Committee. The Faculty also has an internationally-recognised role in epidemiology and diagnosis of one of the internationally notifiable viral diseases of finfish, epizootic haematopoietic necrosis virus (EHNV). The Faculty and the Australian Animal Health Laboratory host the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) Reference Laboratory for EHNV which provides research and a diagnostic referral service to the Australian industry, and ensures international diagnostic capabilities by providing technical advice, protocols and immunological and molecular biological reagents to laboratories worldwide. This supports international trade in aquatic animal products. Diseases such as EHNV present real challenges to both commercial fisheries and to the management of ecosystems worldwide. The Faculty has the opportunity to make an increasing contribution to an often overlooked discipline within veterinary science and has appointed a new academic to do this. New research projects funded by ACIAR and the Murray Darling Basin Commission will commence in 2007 and cover topics as diverse as best management practice in shrimp aquaculture through to environmental impacts of fish viruses in threatened species.

Australian Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre
The Faculty of Veterinary Science is a supporting partner in the Australian Biosecurity CRC, which will provide solutions to the growing number of issues in emerging infectious diseases of animals and man. The AB-CRC is a truly collaborative venture with enormous potential. The outcomes of the education and training program will be a large number of trained researchers and a new set of training opportunities in epidemiology, risk analysis, emergency response and other disciplines that underpin biosecurity.

Interdisciplinary Network in Public Health
We commenced a new alliance in 2004 to address public health issues from both veterinary and human disciplines. Interdisciplinary Network in Public Health (INPH) grew out of the realisation that the Faculty of Veterinary Science and the School of Public Health in the Faculty of Medicine needed to build linkages, especially in the area of emerging infectious diseases. The Veterinary Public Health Management postgraduate program provided the initial impetus through a joint project with a medical Honours student to develop on-line zoonoses fact sheets appropriate for both medical and veterinary practitioners. Members of the INPH are now drawn from the Faculty of Veterinary Science, the School of Public Health, the National Centre for Immunisation Research, Westmead Hospital, Discipline of Medicine, Department of Infectious Disease, Northern Rivers University Department of Rural Health, and the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety. The primary concern is to develop core links in research, teaching and community related issues with a focus on infectious diseases and public health. The INPH is an evolving venture and represents an exciting step forward in the development of important and lasting partnerships between veterinary science, medicine and public health, disciplines that traditionally have remained separate.

Gut Immunobiology Research Team
Academic staff from the parasitology and Johne’s disease research groups have formed a gut immunobiology team to advance studies on intractable problems facing the sheep industry – gastrointestinal nematodes, which have developed resistance to common anthelmintics, and paratuberculosis. There are many parallels at immunological and pathophysiological levels. The gut immunobiology group is able to pool ideas, equipment, technology and physical resources to maximise the possibilities of finding solutions to these problems. Associate Professor David Emery leads this program on the Sydney campus.
**Pig Health**

The pig health group led by Dr Trish Holyoake was recognised in 2005 with the award of a prestigious Australian Research Council Linkage Grant to evaluate vaccination against *Lawsonia intracellularis*, an important intestinal pathogen. Tackling this intractable problem is made possible by the unique partnership with industry (Boehringer Ingelheim and NSW DPI) and the diverse skills in the Faculty in pig husbandry, epidemiology, gut immunobiology and infectious diseases. Other projects are related to biosecurity within the pig industry and form a part of a coherent national strategy to protect the livestock sector from emerging diseases.

**Direct links between human and animal health**

Dr Robert Dixon was successful in 2006 in obtaining an ARC Linkage grant focussing on the dog that will enable improvements in public health in indigenous communities, recognising that dogs harbour a number of diseases that affect humans. National benefits will include improving the social fabric in rural and remote areas.

**Capacity building**

Australia faces an imminent shortage of expertise in animal health. In one project we found that 70% of experts in aquatic animal health in Australia are aged more than 50 years. There is a similar situation in terrestrial animal pathology. Furthermore, there is a shortage of people who can train the next generation. The Faculty of Veterinary Science is making an important contribution by establishing this strong program in Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health to build human capacity.

**Rural and regional communities**

The benefits of the research and post graduate activity covered in this five year report will accrue directly to rural communities and thence to the wider community. The statistics on agricultural production are impressive: 17% of working Australians are employed directly and indirectly in farming, 50% of these in capital cities; farming contributes 12% of gross domestic product ($72 billion), 24% of goods and services exports ($26 billion), utilises 60% of the Australian landmass, and there have been productivity increases of 3 to 4% annually for 20 years.

We welcome feedback on any aspects of our program in Farm Animal and Veterinary Public Health.

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Professor Richard Whittington  
Chair Farm Animal Health  
December 2006