

RCVS VETCOMPASS EQUINE PANDEMIC PROJECT

DR S ALLEN, DR D O'NEILL, DR J CARDWELL, PROF K VERHEYEN, PROF D BRODBELT

VETERINARY EPIDEMIOLOGY, ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC HEALTH GROUP
DEPARTMENT OF PATHOBIOLOGY AND POPULATION SCIENCES
ROYAL VETERINARY COLLEGE

THIS DOCUMENT REPRESENTS A SUMMARY OF THE WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE ABOVE AUTHORS. THE FULL PROJECT IS UNDER JOURNAL SUBMISSION AND THE FINAL JOURNAL PUBLICATION OF THE REPORT WILL BE AVAILABLE IN DUE COURSE.

JUNE 2022



RCVS VETCOMPASS EQUINE PANDEMIC PROJECT

DR S ALLEN, DR D O'NEILL, DR J CARDWELL, PROF K VERHEYEN, PROF D BRODBELT
VETERINARY EPIDEMIOLOGY, ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC HEALTH GROUP
DEPARTMENT OF PATHOBIOLOGY AND POPULATION SCIENCES
ROYAL VETERINARY COLLEGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable challenges for the profession. Changes to normal working practices were needed to provide essential services, whilst safeguarding human health. This study explores the impact of the pandemic on equine veterinary care in the UK. The study describes equine veterinary activity in the 12-months immediately prior to and following the introduction of the first lockdown and reviews care in two periods during maximal COVID-19 restrictions and the same periods pre-pandemic. The specific objectives were to:

- Describe 12 months of equine veterinary activity during (23/03/2020–22/03/2021) and before (23/03/2019–22/03/2020) the pandemic for the entire study population.
- Review in detail, in a random sample, equine veterinary care for two two-month periods when maximum COVID-19 restrictions were enforced (23/03/2020–22/05/2020 and 05/11/20–04/01/2021) and the corresponding periods in the pre-pandemic year.

The study population included equids under the active care of 20 UK mixed and equine veterinary practices participating within VetCompass. The total number of equids and care episodes were reported per month. Proportional measures of activity and face-to-face activity were calculated. Wilcoxon signed rank tests were used to compare activity in the pre-pandemic and pandemic year. Details of all care episodes provided to random samples of 1,000 equids in four, two-month periods of interest were extracted. Nature of care (face-to-face or non-face-to-face), episode type (routine or problem) and clinical indications were described by number and expressed as a proportion of corresponding episodes or indications, with 95% confidence intervals.

During the two-year study period, 236,997 care episodes were provided to 46,095 equids. The greatest disruption to veterinary activity was observed in the early pandemic. In the month following the introduction of the first national lockdown, compared to pre-pandemic, there was a 39% and 43% decrease in the numbers of equids under active care and episodes of care, respectively. In the first pandemic period, proportional activity fell by a median of 10.7% and proportional face-to-face activity by a median of 20.2% per practice compared to the corresponding pre-pandemic period. Consistent with professional guidance, there was a decrease in the proportion of care episodes attributable to vaccination and routine dental work. Whilst there was no difference in systemic antimicrobial prescription, there was an increase in the proportion of clinical care episodes where non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs were prescribed in the early pandemic compared to the early pre-pandemic period. By June 2020, absolute and proportional measures of veterinary activity had returned towards near normal levels. Subsequent tightening of COVID-19 restrictions had little effect on equine veterinary care.

Throughout the pandemic, veterinary professionals have acted in a manner that not only protected human health but ensured animal health or welfare were not compromised. In addition to the measures described above, within the EPRs there was evidence of veterinarians conducting COVID-19 risk assessments prior to attendance and recommending non-urgent work be delayed. In addition, the clinical narrative often stated that social distancing was maintained, and personal protective equipment worn during physical examinations.

Equine veterinary care was adversely affected in the early pandemic, however, disruption to services was short-lived. Throughout this challenging time, the profession demonstrated their ability to implement COVID-19 risk-mitigating working practices and maintain vital veterinary services.