

Q FEVER REGISTER DEVELOPED TO ADDRESS HEALTH CONCERN IN THE MEAT INDUSTRY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Adapted from *WorkCover News*, March–May 2002 and the Australian Q Fever Register Web site.

WHAT IS Q FEVER?

Q fever symptoms tend to be flu-like, and in about 20 per cent of cases a more chronic debilitating illness, characterised by extreme fatigue, develops. In a small number of cases, serious cardiac and liver complications occur.

The organism, *Coxiella burnetii*, that causes Q fever in humans, is a bacteria that can exist in a variety of domestic and wild animals without the animal displaying apparent signs of infection. Infection most commonly occurs through inhalation. Transmission to humans most typically happens in connection with fine mists, or very small droplets liberated from the blood, milk, placenta, birth fluids, urine or faeces of infected animals. Infected aerosols generally result from the slaughter of infected livestock and during the livestock birth process. Hence workers in the meat industry, farmers and veterinarians are key occupational groups at risk of Q fever.

Each year there are approximately 600 reported cases of Q fever, 200 of which result in hospitalisation and there are around three fatalities. Ninety per cent of cases occur in New South Wales and southern Queensland. It has been estimated that workers' compensation costs associated with Q fever are more than \$1 million per year.

THE Q FEVER REGISTER

The Australian Q Fever Register was established to register the Q fever immune status of individuals, to prevent unnecessary testing, and to minimise the risk of exposing susceptible individuals to the organism in the workplace.

Organisations linked to the register (primarily meat processors and medical practitioners) can both submit the results of screening tests and immunisation details to the register and use the register to check an individual's immunisation status. The register data are stored on a 'live' database linked to the Internet to allow users to access up-to-date information.

The register was initiated by the Meat Processing Industry Sub Group of WorkCover's Consumer Manufacturing

Industry Reference Group. Two members of the Sub Group, the Australian Meat Processor Corporation and Meat and Livestock Australia are funding the register.

The Australian Q Fever Register is the first non-statutory health register to be established in Australia. The register adheres to strict privacy guidelines to ensure the security and privacy of personal information. The database and Web site are secure, with all data being encrypted during transmission. The register was developed and is managed by AusVet Animal Health Services Pty Ltd. It is overseen by the Australian Q Fever Register Technical Management Committee, which is made up of representatives from:

- Meat and Livestock Australia;
- Australian Meat Industry Employees Union;
- WorkCover NSW;
- the Health Departments of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia;
- CSL Ltd (Commonwealth Serum Laboratories);
- Australian Department of Health and Ageing;
- medical experts;
- representatives of meat processing industry employers.

The register has been fully operational since November 2001; its coverage is increasing. *WorkCover News* (March–May 2002) reported that in February there were 36 organisations, and the immunisation status of 1122 individuals, registered. By mid-May the number of registrations had expanded to 49 organisations and 3059 individuals; only 500 of these individuals, however, were from NSW.

With a high rate of employee turnover in the meat industry, the Q Fever Register will aid the industry in minimising the delay required before new employees can safely commence duties. Employers are less likely to start new workers of unknown immunity status, if this information is already available. In the long term, this should assist in reducing the incidence of Q fever. ☒

The Q Fever Web site can be viewed at www.qfever.org.