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Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union

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Q-FEVER: A HEALTH CONCERN IN MEAT INDUSTRY

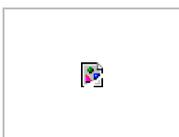
The disease Q-fever is a major concern in NSW and Queensland - where nearly 90 percent of Australian cases occur. Each year approximately 600 cases of Q-fever are reported nationally, with an average of 200 people hospitalised and three deaths occurring as a result of the disease.

Each year more than 1,700 working hours are lost due to Q-fever with workers compensation costs estimated at around \$1 million. Acute cases of Q-fever can cost between \$7,000 and \$50,000.

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It is of concern that the number of cases was not decreasing, with most cases being adult males from NSW and southern Queensland. Most people infected by Q-fever recover after an acute flu like illness but up to 20% of cases may go on to develop a chronic debilitating illness marked by extreme fatigue. In a small number of cases serious cardiac and liver complications can occur.

The meat industry and WorkCover have been concerned for some time about the increasing rate of workers compensation claims for Q-fever and an associated illness Q-fever syndrome - a type of chronic fatigue syndrome.

WorkCover are working in conjunction with the meat industry to raise awareness of the disease with an internet register that encourages Q-fever vaccinations to reduce the incidence of the illness and its associated costs to our communities.

WorkCover's Consumer Manufacturing Industry Reference Group includes a sub-group representing the meat processing industry who initiated the register. Two members of the sub-group, the Australian Meat Processor Corporation and Meat & Livestock Australia, are funding the register. The sub-groups other members are the National Meat Association, The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union and three meat processor representatives.

The Australian Q-fever Register was developed, and is managed by AusVet Animal Health Services with assistance from NSW Health. The register went live in September 2001.

As of February 2002, 35 organisations and 1,122 individuals were registered. Those meat processors who should register but have not done so should register via the Q-fever website.

If you wish to participate in the register you can do so by e-mail at register@qfever.org or contact 1300 733 837.

The Q-fever website address is www.qfever.org

Did you know?

Q-fever became known in Australia during the 1930s when workers at a Brisbane meat processing plant became ill with a fever. As a cause of the illness was unknown, the workers were diagnosed with 'Query' fever and this was eventually

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abbreviated to Q-fever. Q-fever exists in every Australian state and Territory and worldwide with the exception of a few European countries and New Zealand.

How do you get Q-fever?

Q-fever in humans is a bacterium that can exist in a variety of domestic and wild animals without the animal displaying any apparent signs of the infection. It is a particularly hardy organism that can survive in environments such as dust or soil for many months. Humans may inhale contaminated dust when blown, possibly for a kilometre or more, in dry and windy conditions. Infection may occur by way of skin abrasions and splashes of infected material into the eye.

How do I get vaccinated?

Q-fever vaccinations involve a skin test and vaccine with a three week waiting period. To avoid the potentially dangerous side effects of vaccinating a person who has previously been exposed to Q-fever, a skin and blood test are required before vaccination. The skin test takes one week to complete, and only then, if both skin and blood tests are negative, will the person be vaccinated. There is further delay of two weeks before the person's full immunity develops and they can start work.

Barriers to vaccination among meat processors have included:

- *Cost of testing
- *A voluntary worker/held record of vaccination rather than a compulsory employer - held data base
- *The risks associated with multiple vaccination, and
- *Highly mobile workforce.

Despite the availability of a safe and highly effective vaccine since 1989, immunisation is lower than considered acceptable. The Q-fever register is expected to assist the industry and workers to break down these barriers.

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