

Fitness for livestock transport certificates – a field veterinarian perspective

David RH Robertson
Veterinary Centre Oamaru

Transport certificates are a brief respite from the physical demands of a production animal veterinarian.

They are a little window into the unique powers a veterinarian can possess. They are a privilege, can be a ponderous challenge, and they are discretionary. The emotional extremes of this are somewhere between the authority going to your head and you appear obstinate and officious, or you crumple under the weight of it and refuse to do certificates full stop or commit to making any decisions. Somewhere in between is a pragmatism to get the animal(s) out of limbo land and the owner to realise some value of the stock, or it can become a learning exercise that the is “fair enough” and unfortunate loss to the system. The veterinaria and the certifying professional requirements are an important check (or balance) in ensuring the welfare standards of New Zealand farming Inc. are maintained.

One thing to remind yourself of (as you scratch around for your pad somewhere on the backseat and find a functional pen), is that a transport certificate of is a legal document. This means it is in your best interests to fill them out properly. Using your best print style handwriting and filling in all the boxes is a good start. The other aspects of this are to be factual, concise and truthful. Vagueness is not that cool in these instances, nor is fudging facts or leaving the farmer to fill bits in later.

If you are thorough, reasonable, truthful and pragmatic, and talk to the meat works veterinarians about anything you're unsure of, you can't really get into trouble. There is a quite a bit of discretionary wiggle room. However, if you do slip up on some detail, they tend to be lenient with an educational letter on the first go.

In the case of veterinary transport certification this is one area being an NZVA member is well worth it. The triplicate pads that are produced (albeit very manual and a relic of a paper and pen world) are excellent. By ticking those boxes on transport requirements, filling in IDs and descriptors of the animals signing and dating etc. you are very efficiently producing a history, physical exam and treatment plan for these animals. To fulfil these legal requirements without the NZVA transport certificate books would be very arduous and require that you are supplied with a driver or regular office time so you can attend to legal affidavit compiling between calls. We didn't get into the rough and tumble large animal vetting to play that game. Be thankful to your supreme creator for those boxes to tick. Furthermore, the veterinary world has been efficiently corralled by the well thought out guidelines for declaring animals fit for transportation. I would encourage all practices to remind their team and their clients of these guidelines. It takes a lot of the awkwardness out of saying 'no' to the request for an injured or diseased animal to be transported. On the other extreme, you don't want to end up being the 'requested yes vet' for transport certs for cases that other veterinarians wouldn't certify.

Video requests can be a legitimate way of assessing the animal, but it is a time consuming and cumbersome admin exercise of getting the vet cert in the hands of the farmer for when the truck comes.

Regular reminders to farmers about how the process of certifying animals operates is good fodder for clinic newsletters or a talk the new grads can do at the next farmer-vet educational evening. I will not detail all that here, see the NVZA links, but the biggies are as follows:

- Ingrown horns (Regulation 38).
- Bleeding horns or antlers (Regulation 39).

- Lameness (Regulation 40) (relates to cattle, deer, pigs, sheep, and goats).
- Late term pregnancy (Regulation 41).
- Injured or diseased udders (Regulation 42).
- Eye cancer (Regulation 43).

If animals with these conditions are transported without a discretionary veterinary certificate it would be an offence under the The Animal Welfare Regulations (2018).

My general guidelines for issuing transport certification are:

- No bleeding or discharging. Dangly bits of udder can be ligated and removed. I have recently discovered cable ties are quite good for these. Chronic crusty skin is ok - mostly. No moist or maggoty bits.
- Must be able to put all feet down when standing. The 1,2,3 lameness grading has been good to use. Grade 3 non-weight bearing are a no. Marginal 2's can go if there are conditions attached (closest works, last on first off, lower deck etc). Healed broken legs are an awkward one. These have recently been spotlighted as not being accepted for transport – even though they will be ok. This is to not condone the neglect of injured animals in the hope they might come right one day. Proof of appropriate care is needed to be able to send them. “Put the hog (with a broken leg) in a bog” is no longer a saying to live by.
- Horns inside the ears and not less than three weeks since dehorning. Pointy horns can be a problem. Broken horns during transport are viewed dimly, so best to educate farmers to address the horns well before they need to be transported. Be a leader and suggest you book in a time to debud those horned-hereford weaners or 100kg Friesian bulls next week. Take dodgy horns out during preg testing and wait for moment when they say, “you won’t need to go to the gym tonight”. Laugh about it over dinner that evening. Which leads me to the “Would you eat that”? test:
- Sick animals with sunken eyes or febrile are a no go. Johnes cases mostly go, but weak, emaciated are a no. I know it is a fitness for transport, not fitness for human consumption assessment, but it seems pragmatic to consider this.
- Cancer eyes can go with certification if they are not involving the bone and not bleeding and discharging. You can actually stitch the eyelid closed and this is acceptable in some instances. There was some clarification required among our veterinarians on this area. Farmers cannot send things greater than a 10c piece without a certificate. But veterinarians can certify bigger lesions provided the above criteria are met.

Get to know the verification authority veterinarians. Many have had clinical experience and helpful with attenuating your professional views on what is acceptable.

I would like more discretion on the time frame allowed for animals to go following certification. Notifying the 'not the nearest works' is a pain and doesn't work that well because the animal arrival time is not really known, and it can be hard to get hold of the on-site veterinarian.

It is inevitable that the veterinary certification system will be digitised in the future. Apps are the solution to every life task or slight inconvenience.

Lastly don't worry about losing your licence or getting struck off because of transport certificate. It can be quite liberating to think of the other things you could do with your time if you weren't a veterinarian - at least that's what I tell the new grads fretting over doing their first few transport certificates.

References

NZVA. *Fitness for transport*. <https://nzva.org.nz/clinical-resources/general/fitness>.