

Changing risk profile of equine veterinary practice and its management

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The presentation provides an overview of the shifting risk landscape in equine veterinary practice, focusing on the increase in professional liability claims. In general, there is increased litigiousness. The equine sector is experiencing more claims, especially pre-purchase claims, and claims of higher value.

This increase is attributed to a more litigious clientele, influenced by several factors:

1. Covid-19 impact: The pandemic has materially affected professional indemnity (PI) claims, with a 240% increase in caseload post-Covid. Clients have become angrier and intolerant, contributing to this rise. Although the number of claims has decreased recently, they still exceed pre-Covid levels.
2. Economic pressures: In a challenging economic environment, some clients are motivated by the prospect of obtaining “easy” money, leading to exaggerated or fabricated claims. Claims arise from direct litigation, Disputes Tribunal hearings or VCNZ complaints. With DT hearings, involving amounts under \$30,000, resolution has become somewhat of a lottery. This is because the increase in hearings has led to a rise in inexperienced referees with outcomes far more unpredictable.
3. Rising client expectations: The proliferation of social media, Google have exposed veterinarians to far more client scrutiny. Unfortunately, a significant part of this is from misinformed or biased information. The increasing trend of “humanising” animal behaviour often adds fuel to the fire in this respect. The availability specialist referral practices have made advanced treatment options more accessible and increased treatment costs. Insurance for veterinary treatment costs also increases what clients are prepared to pay for.
4. Clients are no longer so accepting of general practitioner-level care where there may be times when outcomes are not perfect. This has resulted in more PI claims and has caused some mixed large animal practitioners to lose confidence and become reluctant to expose themselves to stress and risk by working with horses; the result is a shortage of equine service in some more remote areas.
5. Communication issues: Some veterinary practices suffer from poor, inaccurate, or untimely communication, which undermines their credibility and complicates the process of defending or deflecting claims. These are preventable issues that reflect a deficient practice culture. Improving communication and duty of care could eliminate such problems and reduce the associated risks.

The presentation underscores the importance of implementing better risk management and communication strategies to address these challenges and mitigate the increasing risks associated with equine veterinary practice.

