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A Tradition of Leadership and Excellence in Equine Medicine

**West Nile update: Broodmare vaccination
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The West Nile virus (WNV) was introduced to Florida's native horse population over two years ago. A vaccine was quickly developed, accelerated through required testing, and available to veterinarians from Ft. Dodge Animal Health in August 2001, shortly after the arrival of the new disease in central Florida. The WNV vaccine was, at that time, labeled by Ft. Dodge as conditionally licensed by the USDA. Veterinarians throughout the country pondered the efficacy and safety of the new WNV vaccine. As the WNV epidemic swept through central Florida and the rest of the country, it quickly became evident that the potential risks associated with administering a relatively untested and unproved WNV vaccine must be assumed. Horses of all ages and in various rigors of training were being afflicted with West Nile disease. Despite the skepticism of its safety, the new WNV vaccine illuminated the horse industry with a ray of hope.

Farms that maintain strict primary inoculation and routine boosters with the WNV vaccine have experienced fewer confirmed cases of West Nile disease and/or lessened severity of the disease in the horses afflicted (i.e. fewer sick days, fewer deaths). Side effects of WNV vaccine have been no different than side effects of the vaccines for Eastern and Western Equine Encephalitis, Tetanus, Flu, or Rhino. This has included occasional local inflammation (swelling, pain, heat) and/or mild transient systemic inflammation (fever, malaise, poor appetite).

In February, 2003, Ft. Dodge's WNV vaccine was approved and fully licensed by the USDA. As most other vaccines approved for horses, it is not approved for use in pregnant mares. This simply means that it has not undergone additional safety challenges specific to studies comprised entirely of pregnant mares. Not being approved for a specific group of horses is a non-statement by the manufacturer. It does not indicate safety or imply risk within this group of horses, rather the manufacturer has not parted with the money necessary to conduct the required testing to obtain such approval.

Recently, information and testimonials in the media, including the general press and the Internet, have clouded the confidence that was so quickly achieved by the WNV vaccine. The loudest concern has been voiced in regards to

administering WNV vaccine to mares in various stages of pregnancy. In reaction and less dramatic fashion, the manufacturer, numerous public veterinary institutions, and numerous private equine veterinary practitioners have diplomatically concluded that there has not been an unacceptable amount of side effects that can be confirmed to WNV vaccination. Peterson & Smith veterinarians have administered over 50,000 doses of Ft. Dodge WNV vaccine to horses of all ages, rigors of training, and stages of pregnancy. There has been no appreciable increase or decrease of conception rates, abortions, stillborns, or congenital abnormalities in mares who have received WNV vaccinations.

I continue to recommend a primary inoculation of two WNV vaccines given 2-4 weeks apart in 3-4 month-old foals and unvaccinated horses. Boosters are given at 4-6 month intervals. Broodmares may be vaccinated at any stage of pregnancy and most importantly at 10 months of pregnancy. This should allow for adequate transfer of WNV immunity to foals when they stand and nurse. It is currently unknown how long this immunity is protective, but I speculate that it begins to wane at 3-4 months of age.

Vector control (i.e. fly sprays, removal of standing water) remains the cornerstone of preventing the mosquito-borne West Nile disease. If you have any concerns with your mares or their pregnancies, especially in regards to WNV vaccinations, please contact your veterinarian.