

HENDRA VIRUS - OUR STORY

It was Thursday the 3rd July 2008, I had a week off work and had taken my 7yo daughter to visit her Nanna and Aunty. Breeanna wanted to stay there for the second week of the school holidays so I was preparing to drive the 500km home alone when I got a phonecall to say that "Dizzy", one of my beloved paint bred mares (dam of my stud stallion), who was retired out at my Dad's farm - had been found dead in the paddock. She had seemed fine the previous day when she had led the other horses up to water late in the afternoon, but she hadn't come up again the next morning . . . she was found dead in a gully at 3pm that afternoon. No broken bones, no struggle marks on the ground, nothing at all to suggest why a fat and healthy 15yo horse had laid down and died overnight. . . Even though it was winter and the snakes should be asleep, maybe she had disturbed one that was asleep under a log in the gully, the horses had been foraging in the gullies lately due to the grass drying out up on the flats where they normally grazed.

I had no idea as I drove out Mum's gate and headed for home, that I would not see my daughter again for nearly 2 months, and that this day would mark the beginning of a horrible experience that I will never forget.

The following week passed and although saddened by the loss of Dizzy, she had been buried and we had said our goodbyes. All seemed normal again until on the afternoon of Thursday the 10th July, I received a phonecall at work. Buddy - Dizzy's 5yo son - was not well. He had a slightly swollen muzzle and was somewhat lethargic but apart from that he was still grazing lightly, drinking and pooping. Maybe wasp stings from putting his nose where it shouldn't have been? Or maybe he had eaten something mildly poisonous but this was unlikely as he was born in and had lived his whole life in this paddock, but then again it was dry and maybe he had been in the gullies too. He could have tried something he would not normally eat or maybe he too had found a snake but a less venomous one . . . by evening he was worse. His two paddock mates, Dancer and her son Thomas, were moved out into another paddock. Buddy had now developed a weak, staggering gait (he looked like he had been sedated), refused to eat a carrot and had separated himself from the other horses and wandered off into another gully where he could not get back up the steep sides. After driving the 100km from work, I lit a cigarette as I got out of the car and then headed down to see him. (I am often told that smoking could kill me, for a while there I really thought this could be true - but not for obvious reasons . . . you see I had gone to Buddy with my lit cigarette in hand and opened his lips with my fingers to check his gums. Then continued to finish my smoke. This was something that I have done hundreds of times over the years but will never do again. It would come to haunt me in the coming months as it meant that I had placed myself in a higher risk category by the possibility of ingesting infectious body fluids.) Buddy now had a slight nasal discharge that was thick and mustard coloured, an elevated heart rate and the swelling around his muzzle had gotten worse with it now travelling through the gullet and then up around the jawline to the top of his neck at the poll. When I checked his gums the whole inside of his mouth was red and inflamed with capillary haemorrhaging . . . I called the vet. Did he have a temperature? Well it was only 38° and his breathing looked fine. (Looking back it had been a very cold night and maybe this had masked a higher temp). With Redland's Vet Clinic and Hendra Virus in the news my vet and I joked that without a roaring temp (the guidelines said it had to be over 40°), we wouldn't be unlucky enough to have a case of the rare Hendra virus that they had down south. Maybe it was at that point that we jinxed ourselves!

Buddy died the next morning unable to get to his feet again and in respiratory distress (mind you I have seen worse) and with the two unexplained deaths of healthy horses, we opted for an autopsy, as maybe it would shed some light. I was supposed to pick Breeanna up over the weekend, I called Mum to ask her if Breeanna could stay out there until we had the results, just to be safe and quite sure she wouldn't mind an extra few days holiday. The autopsy complete, the DPI notified and the samples sent we waited over the weekend for the results which came with a phonecall late on Monday night from my vet to say that Buddy had tested positive to Hendra Virus. I asked him what happens now and he told me to get some sleep tonight because the shit would probably hit the fan tomorrow! Fat chance of sleeping that night with everything that was running through my head!

The following day the DPI arrived, gave us what information they had, (although they were the first to admit that little is known about Hendra Virus), tested the remaining four horses (Two from an adjoining paddock and the other two who had been paddocked with Dizzy and Buddy). They advised us that they would not exhume Dizzy to test for Hendra, as she had been dead too long. They told us that it was unlikely that the other horses would be positive as Hendra usually presented in a single horse in paddock situations. Redland's was different, as had been the case of Vic Rail, as these horses were housed closely together in a stabled situation. We were told that a quarantine notice would be issued in the coming days and were left with some overalls, gloves and facemasks to use if we needed to handle the horses. They gave us a contact number for Qld Health, as we would need to arrange testing for ourselves and they would be back in two weeks to run another lot of tests on the horses.

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The remainder of the week was hectic with numerous visits and phonecalls to and from DPI, Qld Health, the media, concerned neighbours and other horseowners in the surrounding district. We arranged for testing for the humans at the hospital (we had seven people exposed to Hendra before we suspected anything and knew what we were really dealing with). But we were told not to worry as it is hard for humans to catch Hendra and there had never been a case of human to human transmission, so we could continue to go about things as normal.

My employers didn't see it that way and asked me to take unpaid leave until it was sorted out. Working at a saddlery, they didn't want any risk of me bringing it into the store or risking bad publicity either and to be honest I wasn't willing to take the chance that it was totally safe either. (I never did end up returning to that job, it all dragged out too long and they had to replace me). There had only ever been four recorded cases in humans and out of them two people were dead. I arranged for Breeanna to stay with my mother and enrolled her in the local school. Even going to the shops was made uncomfortable as we live in a small town and most people believed the humans were or should have been quarantined along with the horses. In the end I would go late at night only to the supermarket, and then only when I really had to, and only after a hot shower including washing my hair. I do not blame anyone for this, as it is only human nature to fear that which they know little about. That Friday we got the results from the other four horses, they were all negative, but would still require the routine follow up test in two weeks before the quarantine could be released . . . maybe it was all over . . . Phew! Now we just had to wait for the human tests to come back.

Three days later, on Monday the 21st July, we found Dancer laying down in the paddock, breathing fast and sweating profusely. She struggled to her feet and did a lap around the small paddock with the most awkward gait and her head bending around towards her shoulder. She had no nasal discharge and looked quite strong but so very unco-ordinated. She eventually went back down again and we left her there. She looked nothing like Buddy but did have similar swelling around her jawline. Even though you would not have thought she was suffering the same illness as Buddy, we knew it had to be Hendra again and they had been talking about the neurological symptoms seen in the horses at Redland's. There were no vets available to put Dancer down, only a DPI stock inspector who could perform an autopsy, but was not allowed to carry barbiturates to euthanase her . . . we had to shoot her ourselves. Her autopsy samples came back positive for Hendra, the negative blood tests had been the result of being tested during the incubation period.

Thomas, Dancer's 6yo son, was the only horse left from that paddock and was showing mild depression and a slightly higher knee action in his gait. We waited for him to succumb as well . . . but he didn't. Maybe he was just depressed because for the first time in his life he was on his own and had just watched his mother be shot. Added to that he was such a friendly boy, always the first to the fence for a pat but even his human friends did not come near unless they were all dressed up in spacesuits. His next tests all came back negative apart from one which showed such a mild response to one out of the six tests that it could have been a false reaction to the test itself . . . it had happened before where it had turned out to be negative in the end . . . like the racehorse case now in the news at Ballina that was declared negative . . .

I said good-bye to our little man six weeks later, on the anniversary of Steve Irwin's death on the 4th of September, as I led him down the hill towards the team of 11 vets, scientific researchers and DPI staff awaiting to euthanase him and perform a full autopsy. They came from as far away as Melbourne. Thomas had tested positive in later tests that showed he had developed antibodies to the virus from which he was never noticeably ill. People still ask me why we made him suffer and fight through an acute illness from which he would only be put down from in the end anyway . . . the answer is simply that he was never sick. I also still get people telling me that we brought this on ourselves because we must have had our feedbins and water troughs under the trees . . . our troughs have always been kept away from trees and the horses had not needed handfeeding for four years! The few fruit trees on the property have been fenced off for years and there is no flying fox colony on or adjoining the property (a colony is located 6km away at the mouth of the river that runs along the boundary). We can only put it down to an orange lifted by a stray flying fox from the small tree in the house yard or maybe an unnoticed flowering native tree down near the river. My Stepmother had found a dropped orange in the horse paddock about 10 days before Dizzy died and the virus can survive in fruit juice for over four days at temperatures below 22°. It could have come from the saliva of the flying fox but we will never really know for sure as the researchers still have no real evidence of how the virus is transmitted from flying fox to horse.

A few weeks later we received the last of the human test results. We had all tested negative but are not allowed to donate blood for twelve months and should go to a hospital if we fall ill. We were Lucky! Others from Redlands were not.

To increase knowledge and awareness, I have put together a disc containing photos, videos of two of the horses (Dancer and Thomas), a symptom chart of what we saw and other information about Hendra Virus and also flying foxes in general. If anyone would like a copy (free) please send a stamped, self addressed CD mailer to: Kate Purvis, P O Box 1039 Proserpine Qld, 4800