



Defra: Occupational Health Support During Animal and Bird Disease Outbreaks

Animal and bird disease outbreaks are devastating events for farms and local communities. Staff from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) have to manage an outbreak and its consequences. Atos Healthcare's role is to help make sure that they are medically fit to carry out their duties in difficult and very public circumstances.

Atos ™
Healthcare

Defra employs 5,000 staff who carry out government policy for agriculture, horticulture and fisheries in England, as well as policy for a wide range of trade and food issues across the whole of the UK. These responsibilities cover the land and other resources used in food production, the industries that produce and supply food, and the safety and quality of the final product.

The issue

In December 2005, Atos Healthcare was awarded a five-year contract by Defra to provide an Occupational Health advisory service and an Employee Assistance Programme.

A crucial part of our work is to offer immediate high-quality professional support for Defra staff during an outbreak of animal or bird disease. By January 2008, we had been involved in four separate incidents of Avian Influenza. Our job is to ensure that Defra staff who are assigned to deal with an outbreak are physically and psychologically fit for duty in a very intense situation, including the constant glare of news media and public scrutiny.

Our solution

The November 2007 outbreak was particularly significant due to the large number of Defra staff involved, the nature of the virus and the potential economic impact.

Within hours of the breaking news our Lead Occupational Health Adviser was on the way to the Defra Local Disease Control Centre in Bury St. Edmunds.

Atos Healthcare operates a national network of Occupational Health Advisers (OHAs) capable of responding to disease outbreaks anywhere in the UK.

Over a period of 10 days, 60 confidential medical assessments were conducted with Defra staff, including those responsible for culling thousands of birds. Their medical history, any previous experience of disease outbreaks, and the implications of their role upon their health, were all assessed.

A report from each assessment was provided to the Human Resources Manager with fitness for work advice. If a member of staff was assessed as unfit for work, redeployment advice was offered in line with their health status.

As a competent and experienced professional, our OHA took final responsibility for all advice and recommendations. The OHA was also continuously available on site to provide health support for managerial and administrative staff.

Full risk assessment

The service Atos Healthcare provides is designed to cover every eventuality. For example, given the intense conditions in which vets and animal health officers were working, it was important to make sure they could cope with the demands of wearing the necessary personal and respiratory protective equipment. Specific occupational health experience is therefore needed to identify the effects of asthma or claustrophobia so that personal strategies are clear before staff are deployed.

Similarly, all staff involved in the cull had to take medication to protect them from contracting human influenza, which if combined with exposure to the infected birds, could pose a significant health risk. So each member of staff was assessed for any previous or potential problems relating to this type of medication.

The benefits

Our OHAs bring all the professional expertise and personal skills needed to help manage critical incidents and deliver the following benefits:

- > Onsite delivery ensuring a fast response to any incident
- > 24 hour crisis management support enabling business continuity for Defra
- > Highly skilled professionals who are objective, independent and have a working knowledge of the incident subject matter
- > A partnership approach that enables the current and future health risk of employees to be minimised.

Service development

Atos Healthcare works in partnership with customers to continuously improve and develop its services. Following the Avian influenza incidents we are developing a training programme that will provide a network of Occupational Health Advisers across the UK with the necessary skills to respond quickly and effectively to further outbreaks.

Atos Healthcare Crisis Management

Atos Healthcare's Crisis Management capability has been proven in numerous bird, animal and human disease outbreaks. This capability extends to responding to traumatic situations such as serious accidents, a suicide or death at work, and security incidents (eg. bomb). Our trauma response programme has been independently evaluated by the British Occupational Health Research Foundation and has been found to help reduce sickness absence.

In all emergency situations, Atos Healthcare puts the right professionals in place, across the UK, for as long as needed, to deliver both personal services and business reassurance.

"The support and professionalism provided by our Atos Healthcare Occupational Health Adviser is an absolutely vital component in our ability to manage disease outbreaks. It allows Defra to focus on the challenge knowing that every member of staff is fully-assessed, protected and able to fulfil their role safely in a dynamic and stressful situation."

Andrew Love, Head of Health & Safety, Animal Health, Defra

Going forward

For further information, please visit our website atoshealthcare.com