



ARE HEALTH CERTIFICATES ON BORROWED TIME?



By Dee Ellis, DVM, MPA,
State Veterinarian/Executive
Director of the Texas Animal
Health Commission

In the 1960s TV show “Lost in Space,” the robot would always say, “Danger, Will Robinson. Danger!” Well, if the old robot was still here in 2014, he would say, “Danger, Health Certificates. Danger!”

For mixed practitioners, health certificates have been a common part of your practice forever. Sometimes it was the only time you would see a client’s animals. I’m not saying health certificates are going away, but I believe there is a creeping perception that could lead to that if we are not careful, and if you are a fan of paper health certificates, I can promise you that they are dead men walking.

First, let’s talk about the concept of health certificates or certificates of veterinary inspection (CVI) in general. I am beginning to hear over and over again at national industry meetings that folks are questioning if the CVI concept is still viable, due to a “shortage” of veterinarians in rural settings. The line of reasoning is that, since there are not enough veterinarians, the CVI requirement should be dropped because it is impossible to meet. Obviously, this line of thought is usually raised by certain industry reps who don’t want to be bothered or to pay for the service.

I don’t want to debate whether there is a shortage of rural veterinarians or not, but regardless, my thought is that if you paid them appropriately, the veterinarians would come. But that is almost beside the point. I have consistently taken the hard line that there is a need and use for CVIs and that veterinarians should be very cautious about giving up any more services that historically have only been done by our profession.

Unfortunately, I am hearing the same message from other state veterinarians, primarily in the southeastern U.S. In previous articles, you may remember that I discussed the new U.S. animal disease traceability rules now in place that require CVIs for livestock moving interstate. The current workaround to that in some southeastern states is to allow

movements across state lines on what are called “owner/shipper statements.” Veterinarians don’t issue those; instead the owner fills them out. I believe the southern state veterinarians actually had the leverage with the federal mandate to require livestock markets to re-employ veterinarians to write CVIs for interstate movements, but unfortunately, they believed there were not enough veterinarians to do that and endorsed using the owner/shipper documents instead.

I have resisted owner/shipper documents for animals coming into Texas as I believe there is a value to CVIs. Texas is one of the toughest states in requiring CVIs for animals entering the state, even for slaughter cattle. I believe we have to draw a line in the sand and stop this creep to marginalize an important veterinary service. I am raising this issue now so Texas veterinarians can understand that, in some states not that far away, they have given up the fight.

I would agree, however, that the current CVI system should be re-evaluated. For example, in the horse world, many of our regulatory diseases of concern are viral in nature (VS, EHV1, EIA) with very short incubation periods. So does it make sense that Texas has a 45-day expiration date for equine CVIs? It only makes sense if you are a competitor wanting to go to the Fort Worth, San Antonio and Houston stock shows and only pay for one CVI. A 45-day expiration doesn’t make sense if you are really worried about a horse moving diseases between events. I believe we should take a look at that timeframe for equine CVIs.

In regards to paper CVIs, we have to phase those out. They are costly to print, slow to move around between state animal health agencies and impossible to query for quick disease tracing. The future is here, and electronic health certificates (eCVI) are getting more and more user-friendly. There are a number of private companies now providing quality services for veterinarians wishing to utilize eCVIs. They are very convenient to store owner

information and pre-enter identifications on animals that routinely need CVIs issued. TAHC is in the final stages of releasing its own in-house eCVI option, and USDA also has its software for eCVIs.

There is a smartphone app as well that is currently being tested that I am confident marks the beginning of enhanced smartphone use for creating eCVIs.

Texas has a complication, however, that many other states don’t have in that we are statutorily required to charge a fee for CVIs. But all of the eCVI options can accommodate the billing necessary to use online products. For the veterinarians out there who are not computer-savvy, I want to encourage you to start looking at these online resources. TAHC will be looking for creative solutions also to encourage veterinary practitioners to start using eCVIs. One idea would be for the agency to charge less for eCVIs than for paper certificates.

We know that even when we do that, however, there will be a few old-school hold-outs. For those folks, the bad news is that eventually TAHC will simply stop selling the paper CVIs.

In closing, I want to encourage all practitioners to take a look at the eCVI options available. If you aren’t comfortable with the options, ask your staff to take a look for you. If you have questions about the eCVIs available, feel free to call any TAHC office, and we would be glad to help.

In regards to the continued use of CVIs in general to assure the health and marketability of animals moving to events and across state lines, I encourage y’all to please speak up for the value of the veterinarian in this process. The health certificate is one of the services that I believe only veterinarians should provide, and it is a critical implement in our toolbox of services that veterinarians utilize to ensure animals are healthy and marketable when moving for fun, work or commerce. Thank you for all you do. [TV](#)