Improved disease surveillance coverage in Wales as Wales Veterinary Science Centre celebrates first anniversary

It is just over a year since the Wales Veterinary Science Centre was officially launched on the 29th June 2015. In that time the Centre has examined over 300 carcasses, increasing disease surveillance across Wales and engaging with farmers to provide a clearer understanding of the health of the Welsh livestock.

The Centre is based in Aberystwyth and operated by Iechyd Da (Gwledig) Ltd., a consortium of private veterinary practices with interests in farm animal medicine, in partnership with Aberystwyth University. By engaging with the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and the Wales Veterinary Science Centre, veterinary businesses and the livestock industry in Wales have gained access to expert pathology advice and, through the data collected and analysed, to surveillance intelligence.

Private veterinary surgeons have supported the Wales Veterinary Science Centre by sending in farm animals for post-mortem examination from central and north Wales. By the end of June 2016 a total of 328 carcasses, including cattle, sheep, goats, camelids, birds and even a rabbit, had been examined with a diagnostic success rate in over 80% of the cases.

Phil Thomas (MRCVS) Director of Iechyd Da and the Wales Veterinary Science Centre) said:

“We are very pleased with the levels of uptake for this new service and the support we are receiving from both practitioners and their farmer clients.”

In February 2016 a free carcase collection service was introduced to farms across Wales not within the immediate catchment area of existing Veterinary Investigation Centres for livestock post-mortems of surveillance value. This free service will be provided for a period of up to three years and allows carcases to be transported to either the Wales Veterinary Science Centre or the APHA sites at Shrewsbury or Carmarthen. This has led to a significant increase in post-mortem submissions from farms that previously had difficulty in accessing this service, thus increasing surveillance for new diseases.
To date, the WVSC has been supported by vets and a technician who previously worked in APHA Veterinary Investigation Centres and fully trained in PME investigation. They have helped to train Jonathan King, a vet with a number of years of experience in farm animal medicine, as a Veterinary Investigation Officer who is now working almost full time at the Centre.

The Centre has alerted APHA to unusual cases and where food safety or zoonotic disease has been a concern. Expert advice from APHA specialists has been provided to ensure that farmers can continue to deliver the high quality produce for which Wales is proud.

Improving the health and welfare of farm animals is seen as a priority for enhancing the technical and economic efficiency of livestock production within Wales, not only by Welsh Government but also by Welsh lamb and beef producers, Hybu Cig Cymru - Meat Promotion Wales (the levy body), and the veterinary profession.

Will Haresign, Aberystwyth University Emeritus Professor and Wales Veterinary Science Centre Board, said:

“I am especially pleased at the unprecedented manner in which all of these various sectors are now collaborating together towards achieving the objective of improving animal health, and the expert activities of the WVSC are a very important part of that process”.

Professor Christianne Glossop, Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales said:

“I am delighted that the WVSC, working with the APHA, has been successful in its first year. Effective disease surveillance is essential to ensuring good animal health and welfare, so it is reassuring our new arrangements are working well. I’m also pleased that the collaborative approach to detecting diseases is working so well here in Wales.

“Simon Hall, APHA Veterinary Director and Acting Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer for the UK said:

“Over the last year APHA has been working closely with the Wales Veterinary Science Centre to provide expert diagnostic support and surveillance intelligence to veterinary practices and farmers in Wales. The new arrangements are working well and are an excellent example of how we can work in partnership to create an effective disease surveillance network.”