

CHANGES IN EU REGULATIONS ON IMPORTATION OF PETS INTO IRELAND WILL INCREASE THREAT TO HUMAN HEALTH IN THIS COUNTRY

Veterinary Ireland, the representative body for vets in Ireland, notes with concern that from January 1st 2012 there will be a relaxation of the Pet Passport regime that has so successfully protected Ireland from the introduction of fatal human diseases such as Rabies and the dog tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis*.

Veterinary Ireland is seeking a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture to discuss the planned changes with a view to minimizing the risk to human and animal health and welfare from introduction to Ireland of these diseases.

Rabies

It is estimated that 55,000 people die worldwide from rabies each year, with the disease being transmitted primarily by dog bites: once a person shows clinical signs of the disease, a slow and horrific death is almost inevitable.

“We cannot ever let our guard down when it comes to rabies,” warns Alan Rossiter, vice-President of Veterinary Ireland. “Ireland has been free from rabies for over 100 years and we want to keep it that way. We take it for granted that a nip from a dog will not kill us, but Ireland is one of only a small handful of countries in the world that are recognized as ‘Rabies Free’. Any change to animal importation regulations which could increase the risk to our disease free status is of great concern”.

Asked what we can continue to best protect Ireland from rabies Mr. Rossiter added “We must of course ensure that the new relaxed regulations are stringently adhered to and there can never be any tolerance of illegal importation.”

“However we must also ask that if we have to harmonise our import regulations with the rest of the EU, should we not therefore also harmonise our domestic rabies control regulations with what is practiced in those jurisdictions? This for example could mean all domestic pets must vaccinated for rabies. We would prefer for this not to have to happen, but it is an option that will need to be explored.”

Echinococcus multilocularis

Echinococcus multilocularis is a tapeworm that infects dogs and foxes. Ireland is free from this disease but it is prevalent in mainland Europe, with up to 50% of foxes infected in certain areas. The parasite can be killed in dogs and foxes by use of a standard worm treatment. Up to January 1st 2012 the current regulations require that pet dogs and cats are given a tapeworm treatment before leaving mainland Europe for Ireland, thus preventing its spread to Ireland. Unless superceded by other regulations, this stipulation will no longer be in place after that date and dogs and cats can then travel into Ireland without being wormed, dramatically increasing the risk of spread of this disease to Ireland.

Whilst it causes no illness in dogs and foxes at all, if a human becomes infected (via ingestion of the parasite eggs that are passed in dog and fox faeces) they can go on to develop life threatening tumour-like parasitic cysts in the liver, lungs and brain. Without treatment, the condition in humans is fatal in 95% of cases.

Alan Rossiter, vice President of Veterinary Ireland, stated: "If *Echinococcus multilocularis* reaches Irish shores, it will become endemic in the fox population and will be impossible to eradicate. The introduction of the disease would mean that something as simple as picking and eating wild, but potentially contaminated, blackberries on a country walk would become a serious health risk. However we accept that the EU Commission is preparing new regulations regarding *Echinococcus multilocularis* that hopefully will allow us to continue insisting on dogs receiving worm treatment prior to entry to Ireland."

Background information for editors

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Mr. Simon Coveney TD, announced today (30 June 2011) that from 1 January 2012 the entry requirements for pet cats and dogs entering Ireland are being simplified and harmonised with the requirements throughout the rest of the European Union.

This is as a result of the ending of a derogation to Regulation (EC) 998/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council, as amended by the Regulation (EC) 592/2004 of the EU Commission.

This Regulation allowed for movement without quarantine of pet dogs and cats between EU countries by means of a "Pet Passport" which they could receive once they were microchipped and vaccinated against rabies.

At the time of the introduction of Regulation, Ireland, the UK, Sweden and Finland (and subsequently Malta) argued that they needed more stringent regulations to prevent the entry of certain diseases into their countries. This was agreed to and introduced by way of a time-limited derogation to the Regulation.

The diseases causing concern were rabies, the tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis*, and several tick-borne diseases. Ireland, the UK, Sweden, Finland and Malta did not have these diseases but they were present elsewhere in mainland Europe.

The additional safeguards allowed by the derogation were that pets entering Ireland must also have undergone a blood test to demonstrate they have developed protective anti-bodies. It was also agreed pets could not travel to Ireland until six months after the date of the blood test and that pets must receive a tick and tapeworm treatment prior to entry.

This derogation was extended twice before, most recently in July 2010, but will expire on 31 December 2011 and from that date these extra safeguards will no longer be in force.

Press Release Ends

Veterinary Ireland represents veterinary practitioners in private practice and in Central and Local Government. We are happy to provide appropriately qualified and informed persons to contribute further to this debate in a constructive and reasoned manner.

For further press information contact:

Veterinary Ireland
Tel: +353 (0)1 457 7976
Email: hq@vetireland.ie

Alan Rossiter, vice-President of Veterinary Ireland, is available for interview on 0868250067