

Using mixed methods to delineate the policy network and evaluate policy decision-making in response to the 2007 Australian equine influenza outbreak

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Decision-making is critical during disease outbreak response. We conducted this study to evaluate technical policy decision-making during the 2007 outbreak of equine influenza in Australia to describe the stakeholder network involved and the factors driving policy decision-making during an outbreak of emergency animal disease. Systematic review of the outbreak literature and the pre-existing national policy document revealed 6 policy issues involving policy modifications or differing interpretations by different state agencies. Data on factors influencing the decision-making process regarding these six issues and on stakeholder interaction were collected using a pre-tested, semi-structured questionnaire and snowball sampling. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 24 individuals representing 12 industry and government organisations. Quantitative data were analysed using social network analysis and thematic analysis of qualitative data was used to develop explanatory models. Results revealed that technical policy decisions were framed by socio-political, financial, strategic and operational considerations. Industry stakeholders had influence through formal pre-existing channels and through alliances formed during the outbreak but outside the established system. Overall, the crisis management system and response was seen as positive, yet some criticism was expressed: some respondents stated that timely implementation of state policy was hindered by lengthy national committee discussions concerned with operational rather than strategic issues. Unbalanced stakeholder group representation by individual leaders was also voiced as an issue. The results of this research inform effective approaches to stakeholder participation in emergency disease management so as to improve preparedness for future emergency animal disease incursions.