

# Safety and health alert

## 07/98 Q fever in abattoir

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### Incident

Three workers at a South-West abattoir became ill with "flu-like symptoms" at separate times over a four week period during July and August 1997.

Their symptoms included fever, chills, headaches, general body aching and in one case, nausea and vomiting. One of the sick men was an employee of a steel fabrication contractor who was welding in the by-products areas. The other two were abattoir workers - one, a tripe room worker whose job was to open, wash and trim beef paunches, and the other, an operator in the by-products area where goat, sheep and beef wastes were processed in the rendering plant.

Blood tests confirmed that they were all suffering from Q fever. Fortunately, all three recovered after 2 to 3 weeks following medical treatment with antibiotics.

Q fever is a zoonotic disease that can be transmitted from animals (cattle, sheep and goats) to humans. The bacteria (*Coxiella burnetii*) is present in high concentrations in birth products, secretions, urine, milk and mammary glands of infected animals. Infection is usually spread by breathing in contaminated aerosols or dust. Because the bacteria can live for several months in soil, it is very difficult to eradicate. However, human infection can be prevented by vaccination. Throughout Australia over 500 cases are notified annually.

### Factors

1. The workers were not vaccinated against Q fever.
2. The contractor was not informed or aware of the potential risks of Q fever to his worker when working at the abattoir.
3. Workers in abattoirs are at risk of contracting Q fever, particularly where an abattoir has previously been infected.
4. In Western Australia, feral goats and cattle from the North West of the State have been identified as a significant source of infection.

### Recommendations

1. Any person in control of an abattoir is urged to treat seriously the risk of workers and visitors contracting Q fever. Abattoirs that have previously reported cases of Q fever, or those that process feral goats or domestic animals sourced from the North West of the State, must implement effective strategies to minimise the risk of workers and visitors contracting the disease.
2. Any person in control of an abattoir must inform contractors of the potential risks to their employees of contracting Q fever when working in and around an abattoir so that the contractor can initiate the necessary control measures.
3. The Meat Research Corporation publish an *Information Kit on Q Fever for the Australian Meat Industry* and produce Q Fever Vaccination Cards which are available from Meat and Livestock Australia on (02) 9463 9264.



4. More information is available from the Safetyline Institute, which includes a lecture on Q fever. It is located at the [www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/institute](http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/institute), see course 20.
5. A Q fever vaccination program for employees is considered the most effective method of preventing the disease. Employers are urged to contact their local doctor or an occupational physician with WorkSafe Western Australia on (08) 9327 8777 for further advice.
6. If an employee does become affected by a zoonotic disease, including Q fever, the occurrence must be notified to the WorkSafe Western Australia Commissioner forthwith as required by section 19(3)(b) and regulation 2.5 of the [Occupational Safety and Health Act](#) and [Regulations](#).

## Further Information

Further information can be obtained from the WorkSafe internet site [www.worksafe.wa.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au), or by contacting customer service on 1300 307 877 or email: [safety@docep.wa.gov.au](mailto:safety@docep.wa.gov.au).

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