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CANINE FLU STORY OVERHYPED BY MEDIA, EXPERT SAYS

Blacksburg, VA (September 29, 2005)—An internationally recognized expert on infectious diseases in greyhounds says recent media reports of a canine flu epidemic have “greatly inflated the significance” of the scientific paper on which the reports were based.

Dr. Brad Fenwick, Vice President for Research and Professor of Infectious Disease Pathobiology at Virginia Tech, has specialized in the study of disease in racing greyhounds. In a letter to greyhound tracks and kennel operators, Fenwick said there is no scientific basis for the “hysterical tone” of recent media reports. Fenwick wrote the letter at the request of the American Greyhound Council (AGC), an organization formed by track and kennel operators to promote greyhound health and welfare.

“There is no killer dog flu crisis in greyhound racing,” Fenwick wrote, “or outside it, for that matter.”

The media reports were triggered by a research paper published in the current issue of *Science Magazine* suggesting that a respiratory disease observed in greyhounds at several tracks since 2004 is closely related to the equine flu virus. The paper also raised the possibility that the canine flu could be transmitted to humans because it had crossed species from horses to dogs.

Contagious respiratory diseases among dogs are nothing new, and Fenwick said this one appears no more serious than common kennel cough. The vast majority of greyhounds exposed to the canine flu recover completely, with many not even requiring treatment, he said. Evidence shows that most of the dogs that become infected with influenza do not show any symptoms. Where rare fatalities have occurred, they have been due to bacterial complications arising from failure to treat soon enough or with the correct antibiotics.

What disturbed him most about the media reports, Fenwick said, was the suggestion that this canine flu could be transmitted from dogs to humans and that greyhounds or the industry are somehow responsible for the outbreak. It is possible, he said, that this virus was circulating undetected in the pet dog population for some time and only became recognized when it caused problems in the greyhounds, since even a mild respiratory disease is of special concern in a canine athlete.

“There has never been a single recorded instance where the disease was transmitted from a horse to a human,” he noted, “so it is irresponsible in the extreme to suggest that this should be a cause for concern among the general public or pet dog owners.”

Fenwick advised industry members to take several steps to prevent the spread of any contagious diseases among greyhounds, including prompt consultation with qualified veterinarians, the use of appropriate antibiotics, more frequent checking and observation of dogs, extra cleaning and sanitation measures, and isolation of ill dogs away from healthy animals.

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September 29, 2005

Dear Friends:

Over the past weeks, I have received dozens of calls and emails from greyhound racing industry members and journalists about recent media reports of a new canine flu affecting greyhounds in several states. In response to these calls and a request from the American Greyhound Council (AGC), I thought it might be helpful to offer my analysis of the situation as a veterinarian specializing in canine infectious diseases.

It appears that most of the media reports were triggered by a research paper published in *Science Magazine* (www.science.org). The paper was authored by Dr. Cynda Crawford of the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine, and several others. It suggests that a respiratory disease observed in greyhounds at several tracks since 2004 is closely related to the equine flu virus. It also raises the possibility that this canine influenza could be transmitted to humans.

Unfortunately, the media hype surrounding these findings has greatly inflated their scientific significance. It is not the first time scientific facts have been misrepresented and massaged in order to make a story "sexier" than it might have been otherwise. Unfortunately, there is no scientific basis for the hysterical tone of most of the media coverage. In my view, here is the real news:

THERE IS NO "KILLER FLU" CRISIS IN GREYHOUND RACING OR OUTSIDE IT.

For the record, let me share some of my thoughts on this issue:

1. There is no reason to believe that this is a "new" virus, or that it is any more serious than common kennel cough (*Bordetella bronchiseptica*). In fact, similar respiratory disease outbreaks have been observed for several years, both in greyhound racing and in the larger canine pet population.
2. Speculation that greyhounds or the industry are somehow responsible for the emergence of this virus or its spread is not justified. This virus may have been circulating undetected in the canine pet population for some time. The virus was recognized in the greyhound population because of the number of dogs involved and the special care racing greyhounds receive.
3. While a mild or infrequent cough may go unnoticed or be of little concern to owners of pet dogs, even a mild cough in racing greyhounds is reason for concern because it may interfere with their performance as athletes. There is no evidence that greyhounds are any more or any less susceptible than other breeds and greyhounds present no greater risk of transmitting the infection.

4. Our experience has shown that the vast majority of greyhounds exposed to respiratory viruses such as this one recover completely, with many not even requiring treatment. Other evidence indicates that most dogs infected with this virus do not show any signs of illness whatsoever.
5. We have found fatality rates to be less than 1% for more serious cases of respiratory illness among greyhounds and often there are no deaths at all.
6. Where fatalities have occurred, they generally have been attributable not to the virus itself, but to bacterial complications arising from failure to treat promptly with the correct antibiotics.
7. Although we have been aware of equine flu for over forty years, there has never been a single recorded instance where the disease was transmitted from a horse to a human. It is irresponsible in the extreme to suggest that this should be a cause for concern among the general public or among those who come into contact with greyhounds or other canine breeds on a daily basis.

Whether an illness is viral or bacterial in nature, it must be treated properly and promptly to ensure animal health. In previous communications, I have recommended several steps for preventing the spread of contagious disease among greyhounds, including:

- Prompt consultation with veterinarians to ensure that the correct antibiotics are used.
- More frequent checking and observation of dogs to stay ahead of complications.
- Extra care with cleaning and sanitation.
- Isolation of ill dogs away from healthy animals.

As you know, the three leading greyhound racing organizations (AGTOA, NGA, AGC) have funded the development of a new, more effective vaccine for kennel cough. Although the vaccine is not intended for use against an equine-flu type virus, it is designed to protect greyhounds and other canine breeds from most strains of common kennel cough. The vaccine is currently under review by USDA, with clinical trials set for late 2005-early 2006.

When our new vaccine is available, we are confident that outbreaks of respiratory illness will be significantly reduced, not only in greyhound racing but among all canine breeds.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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