All Private Veterinarians, State Veterinarians and Managers of Veterinary Laboratories
All pet and animal owners
All farmers and members of the general public

RE: Covid-19 in animals:

Dear Colleague,

Note: Animals do NOT play a role in the current spread of the worldwide human pandemic BUT even a suspect case in any animal will be regarded as a ‘controlled animal disease’ in terms of the Animal Diseases Act.

1. Background

Since its emergence in late 2019, COVID-19 has spread to locations around the globe. This has led to questions about the importance of this newly discovered virus, if any, to our veterinary patients. Globally, thousands of animals have been tested with negative results, and to date, disease has only been detected globally in a few cats, as well as in tigers and lions in captivity, on two commercial mink farms and in a few isolated cases in dogs. Currently there is NO evidence that animals a play any further role in the current spread of the worldwide human pandemic and based on current knowledge, human-to-human transmission remains the main driver.

2. COVID-19 is a controlled animal disease

Section 1 of the Animal Diseases Act 1984 (Act no 35 of 84) states that "'controlled animal disease' means any animal disease in respect of which any general or particular control measure has been prescribed, and any animal disease which is not indigenous or native to the Republic;" COVID-19 is an exotic animal disease in South Africa and is therefore a controlled disease in animals in terms of the Animal Diseases Act 1984 (Act no 35 of 84). Therefore, all statutory requirements, including requirements regarding testing and reporting,
applicable to controlled animal diseases are applicable to COVID-19. Please note that all suspect COVID-19 cases in animals must be reported to the local State Veterinarian immediately in terms of Section 11 and Regulation 12 of the Animal Diseases Act 1984 (Act no 35 of 84).

3. Laboratories conducting tests on animal samples for COVID-19

Covid-19 is not known to be endemic in animals in South Africa and is thus automatically regarded as a controlled animal disease. Laboratories may only perform COVID-19 diagnostic tests in animals if the Director: Animal Health has granted approval for such testing in line with Regulation 12 B of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No 35 of 1984) which states that,

(1) "A person or a laboratory that does diagnostic testing or screening for a controlled animal disease or a notifiable animal disease in any animal species, shall be registered with the Director;

SANAS accreditation is a prerequisite for approval by the Director: Animal Health. Accreditation and approval is necessary so that the Authorities can ensure that all such laboratory testing is fit for purpose and performed according to international standards in order to provide results that are meaningful and reliable.

The biosafety and biosecurity status of laboratories involved in Covid-19 diagnostics have to be evaluated and approved after the requirements for the biosafety level of all actions and procedures have been established. Any testing of animal samples for COVID-19 without permission by the DAH is a contravention of the Animal Diseases Act and any such transgression will be regarded in a very serious light.

4. Diagnostic procedures

Currently there is no test available for Covid-19 in South Africa for testing in animals. The only test available in animals is a RT PCR that is currently sold in the USA but IDEXX does no plan to release it in South Africa. The Scientific data on the specificity and sensitivity of this test is insufficient and possible crossreactions with a host of other Corona viruses in animals have to still be determined. Further options for testing in animals will be explored for future use. Currently the focus is on human testing and as it is, the demand for human testing is way more than the supply.

Care should also be taken not to over-stretch the limited diagnostic capacity away from where it is crucially required – in humans.
5. One Health aspect and selection of animals sampling

In accordance with the Disaster Regulations for COVID-19, NO sampling for Covid-19 diagnostics in animals may be performed without observing the human risk factors and without considering the broader epidemiological picture in a suspect outbreak in animals.

It must be remembered that the isolation measures at a household with infected persons are entirely in the control of the DoH. The Health and Veterinary team members involved must thus work very closely together in the investigation and sampling of animals if it is decided that such is indicated. And members of both the human and veterinary teams must adhere to the strictest biosafety measures at all times to prevent infection and spread of disease.

The decision to test pets has to be taken with care and should only be performed if clinical signs of respiratory disease is present, a clear link with positive humans has been established, and other more common causes of respiratory disease have been ruled out. Communication between State Veterinarians and the Human Health Services is therefore crucial and all suspect Covid-19 cases in animals must be reported to the nearest State Veterinarian without delay. Should there be a clear suspicion of disease in an animal from a household/environment with confirmed human cases, the Department of Health and State Veterinary Services have to work together to determine the need for sampling and testing of animals. They should also establish the appropriate biosafety and biosecurity measures for humans and animals in these households / environments.

6. Section 20 permission to perform research

Attempts to develop diagnostic test and vaccines as well as any other research projects involving animals or animal products/reagents should be supported by Section 20 permission by the Director: Animal Health. This also includes any surveillance initiatives in pets, domestic animals and game, which should be carefully considered in line with the limited diagnostic tools.

In conclusion, based on the current knowledge about the epidemiology of the COVID-19 pandemic in humans, large scale screening and testing of domestic animals is not warranted. In the human pandemic situation, the testing of humans must receive absolute priority and no resources should be diverted to animal testing under any circumstances. It is important to note that current lockdown measures are putting strain on veterinary laboratory output as not all laboratories have enough staff for other routine animal tests.

Information on the epidemiology of Covid-19 is constantly being gathered by the OIE as the epidemic progresses to inform decisions on diagnosis and management of COVID-19 in...
veterinary patients. We also urge the public and especially all our colleagues and members of the Veterinary and Para-Veterinary Professions to handle any suspicion of COVID-19 in any animal with the utmost responsibility together with the State Veterinary Authorities in such a manner that will support the gathering of all necessary information while at the same time avoid unnecessary panic.

Let us work together to safeguard our animals and ensure that there is safe and healthy food for all.

Kind regards,

[Signature]

DR MPHO MAJA

DIRECTOR: ANIMAL HEALTH

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