SVEPM 2022, the annual conference of the Society for Veterinary Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine: A joyful hybrid meeting after two years online

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The 2022 Annual Meeting of the Society for Veterinary Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine (SVEPM) occurred as planned, as a physical meeting after two years of COVID-19 contingency measures, hosted in Belfast, Northern Ireland, from 23rd to 25th of March, 2022. Thanks to the local organising committee, chaired by Dr. Fraser Menzies, optional online participation was offered to delegates. While the SVEPM committee did their best to maintain the Society's annual meeting as an opportunity to network with peers and stay up to date with the latest research in veterinary epidemiology, after two years of online conferences the advantages of meeting in person became clearly evident. It didn't come without cost – some delegates were reported sick during and after the event, and we were all reminded of the reasons that kept us distant for two years. Yet, we are proud of the engagement of our peers, and particularly happy about being able to offer the opportunity for those who recently started their scientific career under lock-down conditions, to join a community of peers through the young scientist event that traditionally precedes the conference.

The committee reviewed 46 abstracts and prepared a scientific programme that included 21 oral presentations and 59 posters. The number of abstracts and posters were both lower than usual, following the trend of decreasing engagement since the COVID-19 pandemic, which we hope next year will change. The quality of abstracts, oral presentations and posters was however not affected, and delegates could enjoy a rich, high quality scientific programme. As per tradition, six workshops were offered on the first conference morning: *Veterinary clinical epidemiology: the basics*; *Inferential modelling with wide data: use of regularisation,* *variable stability and triangulation to enhance interpretation of results*; *Spatial visualisation of health events: A hands-on practical with R*; *Introduction to Game Theory and its applications to animal health*; *Disease outbreak investigations: practical epidemiological considerations*; and *Substantiating freedom from infection: available statistical methods to prove freedom from infection in an output-based framework*.

On March 23rd, the President Prof. Gerdien van Schaik opened the conference and gave the floor to Dr. Robert Huey, Chief Veterinary Officer for Northern Ireland, who opened the scientific programme with the talk "*The role of vets on the national stage*". The programme continued over the three conference days with the 21 oral presentations and poster viewings. On Friday March 25th, Prof. Julie Fitzpatrick delivered the traditional Gareth Davies Lecture, closing the scientific programme with a presentation entitled "*Science Based Policy - not just about Animal Disease!*".

Ten of those who delivered oral presentations at the conference chose to contribute to this special issue. After judicious peer-review, six manuscripts were published as part of this special issue – their variety of topics and methods applied are an excellent representation of the quality and diversity of the 21 oral presentations held during the 2022 SVEPM conference.

The range of animal species and production systems studied covered companion animals (Elkholly et al., 2023); various livestock - pigs (Merca et al., 2022), small ruminants (Begovoeva et al., 2023) and dairy cattle (Bisschop et al., 2023; Wicaksono et al., 2023); and aquaculture (Moriarty et al., 2023). Most studies were carried out in developed

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countries, but Begovoeva et al. (2023) presented a cross-sectional study estimating the true prevalence of foot-and-mouth (FMD) disease in backyard small ruminants in Nigeria, along with a comprehensive study of risk factor and spatial patterns for the disease. Statistical methods applied ranged from different types of regression models with varying level of complexity (Bisschop et al., 2023; Elkholly et al., 2023; Wicaksono et al., 2023) to probabilistic disease risk assessment models (Moriarty et al., 2023) and time-series analyses of syndromic surveillance data (Merca et al., 2022).

The conclusions of these papers will contribute to informing prevention and control strategies covering a range of health threats and the challenges of responding to them, including refining management practices (Bisschop et al., 2023; Merca et al., 2022; Wicaksono et al., 2023), targeting specific infectious and parasitic diseases (Begovoeva et al., 2023; Merca et al., 2022; Moriarty et al., 2023), antimicrobial resistance (Bisschop et al., 2023; Elkholly et al., 2023) and health as a whole (Merca et al., 2022), both at farm and population levels.

As we continue to struggle with global spread of COVID-19 and other emerging and re-emerging threats, we reiterate our thanks to the organising committees of the last two years, who made this initiative possible under the strained circumstances we faced. This year, we are especially grateful for this opportunity to meet our peers again. We thank Dr. Fraser Menzies for making it possible, and we thank the 232 delegates who joined us at the conference, in particular the keynote speakers, the oral presenters, and the authors who chose to contribute to this special issue.

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