



Guidance on sending diagnostic samples

Over the past few months some practices have experienced problems when trying to send routine diagnostic samples to laboratories using Royal Mail. Royal Mail should accept all samples for routine diagnostic testing as long as the packages comply with the relevant legislation. They do not accept 'Category A' infectious material but as this only applies to samples known to contain dangerous human or animal pathogens this should not affect routine veterinary samples. It is important to emphasise that it is the responsibility of the practice to ensure that samples are sent in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The general guideline from the HSE is that all samples (blood, tissue, excreta, secreta *etc.*) from humans or animals are considered, as a minimum, Category B infectious substances. These samples are then assigned to UN3373 and must be packaged according to IATA PI:650 for transport. Royal Mail will transport Category B infectious material but only if it is packaged correctly. There is an added complication that for Category B samples each individual package must hold a total of less than 50ml of liquid.

Samples which are taken for serology testing from a healthy animal may be exempt from UN3373 under IATA 3.6.2.2.3.6. This states that "patient specimens for which there is minimal likelihood that pathogens are present are not subject to the Regulations if the specimen is packed in a packaging which will prevent any leakage and which is marked with the words "Exempt human specimen" or "Exempt animal specimen" as appropriate."

Whether samples are being sent as 'Category B' or as an 'Exempt animal specimen' the packaging must meet as a minimum the following conditions:

The packaging must consist of 3 components, a leak proof primary receptacle (blood tube/universal container), a leak proof secondary packaging (sealed plastic bag) and an outer packaging of adequate strength for its capacity, mass and intended use (cardboard box). There must also be sufficient absorbent material included in the package to absorb all the sample volume (blue roll, foam, cotton wool *etc.*).

Samples being sent under UN3373 Category B Infectious Material should also display the appropriate symbol. This is a diamond with each side at least 50mm in size in a colour which contrasts clearly with the package background. The diamond should contain 'UN3373' in letters at least 6mm high.

In order to avoid any difficulties the outer packaging should be clearly marked with either:

'UN3373 Category B Infectious Material'

Or

'Exempt animal specimen - non-hazardous'

A degree of professional judgement is required in order to determine whether samples are non-hazardous or Category B infectious materials. It would seem reasonable that in the majority of situations where there would be a need to send over 50ml of bovine blood the exempt animal specimen ruling could apply, for example herd screening for Johne's, screening 20 animals for a metabolic profile. It is however up to the practitioner to use their judgement before deciding how to ship samples.

We are aware of reasonably priced medical courier companies that will deliver samples overnight nationwide that would be suitable for a practice that regularly posts samples. Further advice is likely to be available from your laboratory provider.
