Equine Infectious Anaemia Virus (‘EIA’ or Swamp Fever) has been found in Ireland on 15th June 2006 and thankfully has not yet spread very widely due to prompt action by the Irish authorities. Occasional imported horses test positive in the UK.

What is ‘Swamp Fever’?
This virus only affects equines although similar virus species affect other animals or humans. This ‘Lentivirus’ differs from those in other species in that it’s clinical signs are sometimes rapid in onset compared to e.g. the Human immunodeficiency virus that has a chronic progressive course.

Horses are infected by a variety of means but exposure to blood from another infected equine usually vector borne by biting flies (e.g. Horse flies or Mosquitos) is the usual route of transmission. Infected blood products or blood contaminated equipment (syringes, needles, tooth rasps) can also transmit the disease.

In the current outbreak in Ireland disease was introduced by a contaminated blood product imported from Italy being used to treat foals. One foal infected its Dam and the speculation at present is that the other affected horses were infected by the respiratory route whilst this horse’s stable was being pressure washed to remove blood from the infected mare. This is a very unusual route of transmission but if correct would be much better compared to an infected fly population transmitting the disease.

So what are the Irish and British authorities doing?
The basis of control is to quarantine all horses in contact with known infected cases and blood test them to show whether they are infected. **THERE IS NO CURE** and treatment is aimed at supporting the individual until it is confirmed as infected. If infected all horses are likely to be euthanased or quarantined for life. At first this may seem draconian but many infected horses will die despite treatment and all survivors are permanent carriers and reservoirs of infection for future outbreaks.

Clinical signs
Horses suffer repeated disease incidents with progressive loss of condition, anaemia, muscle weakness, severe depression, fever, anorexia, ataxia, jaundice and swelling of the head, trunk and limbs which may kill them at a future date.

So far over 3000 blood tests have been taken in Ireland with negative results; there are 500 horses under restriction on 17 premises (9 have been euthanased). 25 horses are under restriction on 8 premises in the UK as a result of tracing contacts from Ireland – all have tested negative on the first blood sample.

We have a long wait to see if the outbreak has been controlled because although most cases show a blood antibody rise in 7-14 days after infection some do not and antibodies may take 30 + days to show. Hence repeated negative blood tests are needed; which will mean waiting for 3 months plus before we can breathe a huge sigh of relief. If we are unlucky and the disease enters the fly population then many of our horses may die.

The affected area in Ireland centres on Troytown, County Meath in the North East of the country near to the Northern Ireland border. If you have horses that have travelled from this area since June consult your veterinary surgeon.

There is no need to panic yet but if you suspect a problem contact your vet.
Useful other sources of information.
http://www.thehra.org/doc.php?id=42413
http://www.beva.org.uk/