Animal quarantine

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To the farmer who has experienced losses from entero-toxaemia, footrot, mastitis or toxic paralysis—to mention only a few of the conditions which affected livestock in this State—it might be thought that Western Australia is a country ridden with disease and he would perhaps be surprised to learn that he lives in one of the healthiest countries for livestock in the world.

Ever since the earliest days of settlement, Australia has remained almost free from the great animal plagues and highly infectious diseases that have impoverished other countries, and any that have been introduced have been promptly stamped out before they have had time to become established.

This has not been just a matter of chance, but has been due largely to the constant vigilance of the quarantine services coupled with the fact that Australia is completely isolated by sea from all other countries. Legislation requiring all importations to be made by sea has provided a further safeguard.

Since the incubation period of most of the diseases likely to be introduced would be exceeded by the duration of the voyage, a disease present in the incubation stage at the time of shipment would declare itself in the form of symptoms which would be recognised by the time the animal reached its destination in Australia. As a further precaution, imported animals are detained at a quarantine station for prescribed periods after landing where they are kept under close observation and may be subjected to various treatment and diagnostic tests.

AIR TRANSPORT A DANGER

During recent years the security we have so long enjoyed has been endangered by the speed of air transport, and to meet the situation the importation by air of animals and products of animal origin likely to carry disease has been prohibited.

The importation of animals and their products into Australia is controlled by the Commonwealth Quarantine Act which is administered by the State Veterinary Services. Proclamations under this Act prescribe the countries from which importations may be made and the classes of animals that may be imported and there are regulations which define the conditions to be observed when importations are permitted.

All this is based upon an intimate knowledge of the world disease situation and, while an animal may be introduced from one country without risk, its introduction from another would be fraught with great danger. Thus certain classes of animals may be admitted from New Zealand, Britain and North America with complete or reasonable safety, whereas because of the risk of disease the importation of animals of every description from Europe, Asia, Africa and South America has been totally prohibited. Severe import restrictions are necessary for the protection of our animal industries so that at the present time cattle may be imported only from New Zealand, Britain, Canada and the United States; horses, dogs and cats only from Britain and New Zealand; sheep, poultry and birds only from New Zealand and pigs only from New Zealand and Ireland.

PRODUCTS OF ANIMAL ORIGIN

It is also necessary to exercise a strict control over the introduction of animal products such as hides, skins, meat, eggs, stock foods and fertilisers, straw packing and second-hand bags and, depending upon...
the country of origin and the disease risks involved, either to prohibit their importation entirely or to admit them subject to conditions which will ensure freedom from infection.

FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE

The disease we have reason to fear more than all others is foot and mouth disease which occurs in all countries of the world other than Australia, New Zealand and North America. It affects cloven-hooved animals, is highly contagious and spreads with great rapidity. The infection may be disseminated both by affected animals and materials contaminated by their discharges, and the virus is able to survive for long periods in meat and hides.

Should foot and mouth disease ever reach Australia, it would most likely be introduced with meat brought into the country without authority by migrants, and the initial outbreak could be expected to occur in pigs from which the infection would soon be spread to sheep and cattle. The seizure and destruction of raw sausage and other meat products found in the baggage of migrants at Fremantle or intercepted at the Post Office is almost a daily occurrence and it is not difficult to visualise what the consequences might be should any of this material pass beyond quarantine barriers and find its way into garbage fed to pigs.

An outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Australia would be little short of a national disaster, not only because of the great losses it would inflict upon our livestock industries and the enormous cost of eradication, but also because of the embargoes which would be certain to be placed upon our export products. Its eradication would mean a policy of quarantine and ruthless slaughter and while this would be difficult enough in the settled areas it would present an almost insuperable problem should the disease extend to the pastoral countries.

SOME GRIM EXPERIENCES

Rinderpest, a highly infectious disease of cattle with a mortality rate of about 90 per cent., was introduced into Western Australia in 1923. Fortunately it did not spread beyond the metropolitan area, but to effect its eradication it was necessary to slaughter and burn 1,500 dairy cows and to pay out £60,000 in compensation. The first outbreak occurred on a dairy at Fremantle and the infection is presumed to have been introduced with garbage or manure landed from an overseas vessel carrying live animals as ship's stores. As the result of the lessons learned from this experience live animals such as cattle, sheep and pigs carried on foreign ships as stores are no longer permitted to be brought into Australian ports and ships' garbage cannot be landed except for the purpose of immediate destruction. At Fremantle it is loaded on to barges and taken to sea and dumped.

The swine fever outbreak of 1942 is still fresh in mind. This disease was brought to Australia in pig meats landed by the American forces, scraps of which were afterwards fed to pigs with unboiled garbage and before it was finally eradicated it was responsible for the death or destruction of 13,000 pigs on 123 properties.

About two years ago an embargo was placed upon the importation of sheep from Britain following upon an outbreak of scrapie in a consignment of stud sheep which had been landed in Victoria 12 months previously. Scrapie is caused by a virus which attacks the central nervous system producing symptoms of incoordination of movement, wasting and intense skin irritation and it is invariably fatal. The incubation period is prolonged sometimes extending over two or three years so an early lifting of the ban is not to be expected.

The horse population of Australia is singularly healthy, but importations from countries other than New Zealand or Great Britain could result in the introduction of many infectious diseases the more serious of which are transmitted by biting insects such as March flies, stable flies, ticks and mosquitoes. Amongst these are included a large group of diseases caused by blood parasites known as trypanosomes of which surra is an example and the virus diseases infectious anaemia (swamp fever) and infectious encephalomyelitis or "sleepy sickness" which is also transmissible to man.

Insects capable of transmitting all of these diseases are present in Australia, so that once introduced they would become permanently established.
In the case of dogs, special precautions must be taken to exclude rabies, popularly known as hydrophobia. The virus of the disease is present in the saliva and it may be spread by the bite of the rabid dog to other animals and man. Cases of rabies are always fatal and death in most cases occurs within three days of the onset of symptoms.

Should rabies ever become established in Australia it could be expected to spread to foxes and dingoes and the prospects of eradication would then become remote. This is the case in other countries where foxes, wolves, jackals and even the vampire bat have kept the infection alive.

Because of the wide distribution of rabies importations are allowed only from Britain and New Zealand and no dog from Britain is admitted unless it has been located in that country for six months prior to shipment and as a further precaution it is held in quarantine for 60 days after landing in Australia. This is necessary to cover the incubation period which may at times extend to nine months.

The indiscriminate importation of poultry and birds could result in the introduction of Newcastle disease with disastrous consequences to our poultry industry. This condition is extremely infectious and in some outbreaks the mortality rate has approximated 100 per cent. The domestic fowl is also a reservoir of the virus of equine encephalomyelitis or sleepy sickness.

These are only a few examples of the exotic diseases we have reason to fear—there are others no less serious—and the greatest vigilance on the part of quarantine and disease control officers and stockowners alike will be necessary if we are to continue to exclude them.

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