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EYE CANCER IN CATTLE

E. P. MEYER, B.V.Sc., Veterinary Surgeon

THE CONDITION known as eye cancer occurs in all ages and breeds of cattle but is most common in certain strains of the Hereford breed that have non-pigmented or mottled eyes and eyelids. A yearly incidence of up to 5 per cent can occur in susceptible herds.

Incidence of the disease also varies with age, being most common in cattle aged seven and over.

Cancerous growths can occur at all sites and tissues of the body. In cattle, cancers are rare except the type that involves the eye and its surrounding structures.

In simple terms, a cancerous growth is the uncontrolled growth of tissue which has a tendency to spread. With cancer eye this growth starts at the surface of the eye or cornea, at the lower or upper eyelids or at the inner third eyelid. It is thought to be due to the irritating effect of the ultra-violet light of sunlight on the unpigmented eye tissues.

In its early stages the growth appears as a reddish pea-shaped nodule, which enlarges to invade and destroy the eye and surrounding structures. The whole mass becomes exposed to mechanical damage and secondary bacterial infection, producing an ulcerating foul-smelling wound, that frequently becomes struck by blow-flies.

Secondary cancerous growths can spread to the lymph glands of the head and to the internal organs such as the lung and liver.

Surprisingly, some cows stay in good body condition despite an ulcerated infected and destroyed eye. However, severely affected cows generally become unthrifty, lose condition and eventually become emaciated. Death occasionally occurs because of the extensive secondary infection.

Usually only one eye is affected with the cancerous growth, but occasionally both eyes have the condition.

Recognition

Several conditions can be confused with cancer eye, the most common being grass seed penetration. Cows found with a discharging eye are often found under close examination to have a grass seed under the eyelids, causing mechanical irritation.

A typical ulcerated eye cancer
This has to be carefully removed to relieve the condition.

Pink eye infection can also be confused with cancer eye, but usually a number of cows are affected at the same time, often in both eyes. Pink-eye infected animals recover in about three weeks even without treatment.

**Action—on the farm**

No drugs are available that can halt the progressive cancerous growths. Surgical removal at the early stages, provided all the cancerous tissue is removed, can effect a cure.

The farmer has two alternatives: Recognise affected cows with cancer eye as early as possible and send to market immediately or have the growth surgically removed by a veterinary surgeon. If the cow is valuable or in an advanced stage of pregnancy, surgery is usually successful and economically sound, provided the growth is not too extensive.

**Action—at the abattoir**

Cows that are presented for public sale affected with obvious eye cancer are ordered to be sold for slaughter only.

If the growth is extensive and associated with fever or severe emaciation then the animal is unfit for human consumption and the carcass is condemned. The head and tongue of affected cows are automatically condemned on the slaughter floor as slaughtermen will not handle them. The whole carcass is condemned if on inspection cancerous growths are found in the internal organs.

**Prevention**

The only known way of prevention in susceptible strains of cattle is by cross-breeding to bring in eye pigmentation in the offspring. Slaughtering at an early age in susceptible strains of cattle will also decrease the herd incidence of cancer eyes.

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