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The animal quarantine service

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Exotic diseases are a constant threat to Australia's animal industry and there are many reasons for the uncompromising ban on the import of certain animals from overseas.

Such diseases as foot and mouth and blue tongue would cost Australia a tremendous amount of money if they became established here.

Just how Australia protects itself against the introduction of exotic diseases is described by Veterinary Surgeon, R. K. Kent, M.R.C.V.S., in this article.

A case of foot and mouth disease. The result of introduction of this disease into Australia could be "little short of a national disaster."

THE ANIMAL QUARANTINE SERVICE

WESTERN AUSTRALIA has a livestock population of some 20.5 million apart from poultry and domestic pets and this must, at all costs, be kept free from the exotic diseases that plague many parts of the world.

The first line of defence in this battle against animal diseases is an efficient quarantine service. However, that alone is not enough; there must also be close liaison between the stock owner and the veterinary profession in all matters of animal health. This is necessary so that any obscure outbreak of disease will be immediately investigated.

Without this co-operation a quick diagnosis is unlikely and the second line of defence is broken.

Changing World Conditions

The Commonwealth and State quarantine service has been in existence for over 50 years, and during that time this country has been kept relatively free from most of the serious diseases which in other parts of the world have caused heavy animal losses both in deaths and ill health.

Towards the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century many exotic animal diseases such as Rabies, Sheep Scab, Foot and Mouth, Glanders and Rinderpest gained temporary footholds in Australia but were speedily diagnosed and eradicated.

This happened in the old sailing ship days. The threat is now far greater because of:

1. Widespread exotic diseases throughout the world;
2. Speed of modern transport;
3. Increased travelling facilities; and
4. Importation of animal products.
Animal Disease Position Throughout The World

After the last war many highly infectious and contagious diseases spread into regions and countries previously free of these plagues. Many of these diseases originated from some of the underdeveloped parts of the world, countries where quarantine is not known or is held at a discount.

Diseases such as African horse sickness, a virus disease carried by a biting insect of the Culicoides species, was confined to certain areas in Africa. However within a few years after the last war it had spread into the Middle East countries, Europe and Pakistan, causing extremely heavy losses among the equine population. The death rate in horses was up to 90 per cent of affected animals.

It has to be considered that the climatic conditions found in the northern parts of Australia are conducive to the survival and propagation of this species of insect. If by any chance infected insects should gain entrance into these areas an extremely serious position would arise because the northern parts of Australia rely heavily on horses for station work. This insect could easily enter this country in passengers’ suit cases.

Blue-tongue in sheep, also a virus disease and transmitted by the same insect that carries African horse sickness, was not known outside Africa until diagnosed in the U.S.A. in 1948. It was found in Spain and Portugal in 1954, with a death rate of over 50 per cent.

Foot and mouth disease. Except for a few countries, notably Australia, U.S.A. Canada and New Zealand, this disease has world-wide ramifications. In the United Kingdom, the slaughter policy is adopted and the disease is kept under control.

Foot and mouth disease is to be feared probably more than any other exotic disease.

Once introduced into Australia, it would be quite possible for foot and mouth to get out of hand and spread like wild-fire. Our overseas markets for meat, wool, hides and dairy produce, would be completely disrupted overnight. Enormous economic loss and suffering would occur and the results would be little short of a national disaster to the Australian economy.

Other animal diseases, such as rinderpest, rift valley fever, African swine fever and rabies, to mention only a few, could gain entrance into this country by devious ways.

The quarantine service is fully aware of its responsibilities and is taking every precaution to safeguard this country against the entrance of these diseases.

In the fight against animal disease valuable help is received from the Animal Health Division of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (F.A.O.). Information concerning the global aspect of exotic outbreaks of disease is collected and distributed to the member countries throughout the world. By this means the countries concerned can take immediate quarantine action.

Speed of Modern Transport

In the days before aircraft, when the sailing or steam driven ship was the only method of travel, this country was protected from the invasion of many of the more serious animal diseases because of the time taken on those long sea voyages. Livestock in transit from overseas either died during the voyage or recovered normal health before reaching our shores.

Contagious bovine pleuro-pneumonia gained entry into Victoria at the Port of Melbourne in 1858, and spread into Queensland, W.A. and the Northern Territory. This disease is still present in isolated areas in the far north of Australia, but with the steps now being taken to control the disease it is probable that within a few years it may become non-existent.

Today, with fast transport by air, and to a lesser extent by sea, the ocean barrier which in the past served such a useful purpose has now virtually disappeared. This has brought about a reorientation of views and increased the responsibilities and work of the quarantine service.

It is interesting to note that within the last decade the number of overseas aircraft arriving in Perth has increased from 52 to over 400 planes per year, and this number is still growing. Passengers’ baggage and freight have increased proportionately.
Increased Travel from Overseas

Since the last war, tourism has become a major industry in many overseas countries. Apart from tourists arriving in Australia many students from Asiatic countries are coming here, privately or assisted under the Colombo Plan, to study at our schools and universities. Migrants from rural areas in Europe are also arriving here in considerable numbers.

Inspection of passengers' baggage and belongings is systematically carried out by customs and quarantine officers at each port of entry into Australia. Under the quarantine regulations, foot-wear and leather goods, soiled clothes and articles of food of animal origin capable of carrying disease into Australia are either disinfected or destroyed.

It is not uncommon to find during the search for meat products, food such as salami, hidden in tins of olive oil or in passengers' wearing apparel. One source of danger which cannot be overlooked lies in the visiting stock breeder or farmer. This to a greater extent also applies to the Australian stud master or stock exporter returning to this country after a foreign tour of inspection of cattle and sheep overseas. It is possible that, within a few hours, that person may be back on his property examining his own stock and may unknowingly be carrying disease organisms in his clothes or footwear. This potential source of infection cannot be underestimated.

Importation of Animal Products

The importation of animal products such as tinned meats, poultry, casings, eggs, milk, wool, hides, skins and hair come under quarantine control.

The seizure and destruction of sausages, hams and other meat products found in overseas passengers' baggage and also in parcels containing these products intercepted at post offices are common.

Garbage from Overseas Ships and Aircraft

To ensure that garbage is properly disposed of, quarantine supervision is carried out under the direction of the Commonwealth Director or Health in conjunction with the Chief Quarantine Officer (Animals) in Western Australia.

Diseases such as foot and mouth, swine fever, Newcastle disease and others could easily gain entrance in garbage from ships and aircraft.

In Western Australia during 1942, an outbreak of swine fever occurred after feeding uncooked pig meat scraps in the form of garbage. This happened during the last war when the American forces were stationed in Western Australia and were using food brought into this country from U.S.A.

The recent outbreak of swine fever in N.S.W. is suspected to have been caused by pigs being fed garbage from an overseas ship.

Livestock Importation

Because of the animal disease position throughout the world, severe restrictions and embargoes are placed on the importation of livestock into this country.

Under Commonwealth quarantine legislation there is an embargo on cattle, sheep and goats entering from overseas.

Horses, dogs and cats are permitted into Australia only from the U.K., Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and New Zealand. Poultry and pigs may be imported from New Zealand only.

A strict veterinary inspection, and, when necessary, laboratory tests, are carried out under Government supervision by the exporting country. A further veterinary examination of the imported animals is carried out at the first port of call in Australia. Horses, dogs and cats are placed in quarantine in this country for a safe period before being handed over to owners.

It does not seem likely or desirable that there should be any relaxation of those restrictions in the near future.

Wild and undomesticated animals from certain overseas countries may be permitted into Australia. These animals are placed in permanent quarantine at a zoological garden or other approved place. No individual is however allowed to import
a wild or undomesticated animal to be held in private custody.

The veterinary precautions taken with importation of livestock have only one object in view and that is to safeguard the animal population of this country.

Insect Control

The destruction of insects which may be present on board overseas ships and aircraft is an important part of the duties of the quarantine service.

Many fatal and debilitating diseases of animal origin are transmitted by certain types of biting insects. To minimise the risk of insect-borne disease, disinsectisation of aircraft with a suitable aerosol spray is carried out immediately an overseas plane touches down at its first airport in Australia.

With overseas ships that have carried livestock between decks from this country overseas or between foreign countries, inspection and fogging are undertaken at the first port of call on the Australian coast.

In Brief

All practicable steps are taken in Western Australia and throughout the Commonwealth to ensure that livestock in Australia are kept free from the exotic diseases so prevalent overseas.

It is possible, nevertheless, that an exotic disease agent might elude the quarantine barrier and manifest itself, initially, in some piggery, dairy farm or sheep flock. In these circumstances, therefore, any stock owner noticing an obscure disease outbreak should immediately report it to his nearest veterinary surgeon.
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