

October 15, 2001

Dear New York State Veterinarian,

The potential for the intentional introduction of infectious agents such as anthrax, foot and mouth disease, and other biological agents into human or livestock populations has been underscored by the tragic events of the last month. Therefore, I am writing to ask for your continued vigilance in recognizing and reporting any suspicious infectious agents in the animal populations you treat.

Anthrax is diagnosed infrequently in livestock populations in the United States. It is usually associated with climatic changes such as abnormally abundant rainfall followed by a period of draught. Livestock contract the disease by consuming or inhaling the bacterial spores found in the soil. A vaccine is available and has been very effective at limiting the extent of outbreaks. The disease is not spread easily from animal to animal, and consequently, most outbreaks are self-limiting. Humans can be infected by exposure to infected animal carcasses. The route of infection is usually through direct exposure to abraded skin, and less frequently, aerosolization of spores from contaminated hides. Anthrax has been suggested as an agent suitable for biological warfare, but its use in this realm requires a substantial delivery and dissemination mechanism.

The effects of biological agents should not be, however, underestimated. Infectious agents that may be intentionally introduced can be categorized into two broad classes: (1) those agents of public health significance; and (2) those agents that cause widespread infection in food producing animals. The majority of agents of human health significance that are considered to be potential threats for intentional introduction are, in fact, zoonotic agents. Therefore, animal populations can be expected to serve as a sensitive indicator for these threats. Consequently, the veterinarian will play a key role in the early detection of such an outbreak. Similarly, introduction of agriculturally significant agents, such as Foot and Mouth disease virus, would rapidly establish a propagating epidemic infecting large sectors of the food producing animal industry. Food supply, access to markets, and population mobility would all be affected by such an attack.

Successful management of the accidental or intentional introduction of such agents will depend largely on the ability to rapidly detect, report, and control the movement of suspect infected animals. The primary protective barrier against such infections is the same whether the introduction is intentional or accidental. This barrier can best be described by the term biosecurity. Biosecurity is the collection of management procedures that are designed to exclude the introduction of an agent into an animal population and reduce the likelihood of amplification and further transmission of the agent to other populations. The vigilance of the livestock producer and the veterinarian will be key to the successful resolution of any such attack.

We are urging all producers and veterinary practitioners to report any suspect cases of any unexplained infectious diseases in livestock to their local state field veterinarian, or to call the Division of Animal Industry office at (518) 457-3502. You can also receive information on many topics in this area by reviewing the Department Web Site (www.agmkt.state.ny.us). Please take this opportunity to review your procedures, discuss biosecurity with your producers, and remain alert to unusual disease situations. I am confident that, working together, we can meet this challenge.

Sincerely,

John P. Huntley, DVM, MPH

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