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DISTEMPER IN DOGS

By J. SHILKIN, B.V.Sc., Veterinary Surgeon

CANINE distemper is the most serious disease of dogs in Western Australia and, indeed, throughout Australia and most other parts of the world. Many people both in the metropolitan area and in country districts, will have had personal experience with this disease with their own dogs and will know just how serious a condition it can be.

It is a disease that has been prevalent among dogs for a long period, and over the years its character has changed in some degree—and in some respects for the worse. However, it is possible that this change is due in part, at least, to the introduction into Australia of several viruses other than the true distemper virus. Research work is being carried out in an attempt to clarify the position in regard to these other conditions and it is hoped that eventually a clear picture will be obtained of the so-called distemper complexes.

For the purpose of this talk it will be less confusing if I confine myself to the straight out picture of distemper as it is usually seen by the dog-owner.

DESCRIPTION

Firstly it is an acute, highly infectious disease caused by a filterable virus. It is generally spread from one dog to another by direct contact but may also be spread by indirect means such as contact with an infected kennel or the consumption of food and water contaminated by the discharges of an infected animal.

Whilst it principally affects dogs between the ages of 3 to 18 months, it can affect younger animals if they are exposed to infection and older animals where they have previously not had the opportunity of contact. In this latter connection the disease is occasionally seen in quite old dogs which may have spent their life in remote country districts away from any contact with in-

fection, before being brought to the city or nearer country areas and exposed to infection.

The incubation period of the disease—that is the time which elapses from exposure to infection to the appearance of symptoms—is usually about a week to ten days. However, symptoms may appear as early as the third or fourth day or they may be delayed for as long as three weeks.

SYMPTOMS

The earliest symptoms may be indefinite but the dog usually appears to be rather listless and either has a reduced appetite or will not eat at all. After a few days the symptoms may become more definite with a discharge of mucus and pus from the eyes and nose. Whilst the temperature at this stage is usually high the dog frequently shivers a good deal. These symptoms, in a young dog that has not been immunised, are fairly characteristic and as early treatment is important it is wise to assume that all such cases may in fact be distemper. Seek veterinary assistance where possible or commence your own treatment where this is not possible. At this stage it might be useful to mention a common mistake made by many dog owners who when they realise that the animal is "off colour" assume that worms may be responsible for the condition and treat accordingly. This treatment, by lowering the resistance of the dog, may in fact aggravate the symptoms of distemper so that worm treatment in the early stages of distemper—and of course at other stages—is definitely unwise.

As the disease progresses, the nose becomes hot and dry and may become blocked causing the dog to breathe through its mouth. The inflammation of the eyes—usually a conjunctivitis at first, is responsible for an increase in the discharge from the eyes and lids, and the eyes frequently become gummed up. The dog usually lies round most of the time at this stage but occasionally may have short periods of apparent brightness. In a small proportion of cases the disease does not progress very far and the animal improves quite quickly, regains its appetite and appears to be quite well. Generally, however, the condition becomes progressively worse and one or more of the various complications associated with the disease frequently appear. These consist of bronchitis, pneumonia, gastritis, enteritis or gastro-enteritis. Bronchitis is characterised by a pronounced cough particularly at night—pneumonia by laboured breathing and gastro-enteritis by tenderness over the abdomen, obvious abdominal pain, diarrhoea and sometimes straining.

In some cases, particularly if the resistance of the animal is high and the dog has been carefully nursed, recovery may result after three to four weeks. Such dogs of course have usually lost a good deal of condition and the convalescent stage may be slow. Recovery from such conditions as pneumonia and enteritis is much more likely if expert treatment is carried out particularly with some of the newer drugs available.

A symptom which is fairly common and which has been stated to be characteristic of distemper is the appearance of small yellow pustules on the abdomen. However, these are due to secondary infection by bacteria in an already weakened animal and are not necessarily characteristic at all.

In at least one-third of the dogs affected with distemper, nervous symptoms may develop and whilst these generally appear after the infection has been present for three to four weeks they may occur within the first week or even up to seven or eight weeks from the time of infection. The severity or otherwise of the initial symptoms are not necessarily an indication as to whether nervous symptoms are likely to appear. Paralysis, particularly of the hind

quarters, twitching of part, or the whole, of the body, and fits are most common types of nervous symptoms encountered. Blindness may also develop in a small proportion of cases.

TREATMENT

Even the most skilled treatment of animals affected with the disease will not necessarily ensure recovery. However, early treatment in the great majority of cases will result in recovery without any untoward ill effects and it should be obvious that wherever veterinary services are available they should be sought if distemper is suspected.

Treatment with any of the sulpha drugs—a practice that has been frequently adopted—is inadvisable. While these drugs do often appear to favourably affect the course of the disease for a time, it has been noticed by many veterinarians that dogs so treated will more frequently develop nervous symptoms and it is thought that sulpha drugs are responsible.

Penicillin and the newer antibiotics are widely used in the treatment of distemper and are extremely useful, but where veterinary attention is unobtainable, careful nursing is most important. Affected animals should be kept as quiet as possible and should under no circumstances be allowed exercise. They should be provided with clean, warm, dry, but well-ventilated quarters. The nose and eyes if necessary, should be kept free of discharges. The eyes may be bathed with a warm solution of boracic acid and the eye-lids smeared with boracic ointment to prevent gumming. If necessary the nostrils may be treated in the same manner to prevent drying and cracking. The appetite should be encouraged with nourishing, easily-digestible food such as milk, broth, minced beef and raw eggs. Food should be given in small quantities and at frequent intervals. On the other hand no attempt should be made to force food on an animal which resists.

In the control of distemper it is important to prevent contact between infected and susceptible dogs. This may be difficult in cities and towns where large numbers of dogs are kept, but in country districts avoidance of contact between dogs on neighbouring properties and in adjacent

towns should be possible. Newly purchased dogs should be isolated for approximately three weeks before being allowed to come in contact with other dogs on the property. If it is intended to introduce a new animal after an attack of distemper has occurred, it is desirable that bedding and other material which may have been in contact with infected dogs should be burnt and the kennels disinfected with a 5 per cent. lysol solution. In addition such kennels should be allowed to remain empty for three to four weeks.

Most of these measures can, however, be overcome by having all animals immunised against the disease. Until recently, the method consisted of giving the animal two injections at about three months of age—the dog was actually given an injection of the virus causing the disease, following which anti-distemper serum was given to control it. While this method of immunisation was quite effective, it had its dangers, in that injections given in the incubation

period of the disease, for example, could lead to the developing of an attack of distemper. Care had to be taken too in isolating the dog for at least a fortnight to prevent transmission of the disease to susceptible dogs. Recently, however, a new type of vaccine which eliminates these disadvantages has become available. This is an egg-adapted vaccine which will not produce distemper in the dog but which will produce a good immunity. It consists of only one injection and pups can be vaccinated from eight weeks onwards.

Whilst it can be seen from the foregoing that distemper is a most serious and troublesome ailment, vaccination on a widespread scale could virtually result in the elimination of the disease. Wherever possible, therefore, young animals should be protected by this means.

(From a broadcast talk. Published by courtesy of the Australian Broadcasting Commission.)

THE MESQUITE MENACE

Mesquite, an introduced tree that has long been regarded with tolerance or even approval as a source of shade and fodder may become a serious menace to the pastoral and agricultural industries in the North-West.

This opinion was expressed by the Acting Minister for Lands and Agriculture (Mr. L. F. Kelly) when he returned from Carnarvon after attending a field day at the Gascoyne Research Station.

During his visit to Carnarvon the Minister inspected hundreds of mesquite trees growing in the township and was gravely concerned to note the rapidity of its spread over the past two or three years.

Mesquite trees had formed dense thickets in some areas, and isolated trees were seen as far out as the bridge over the Gascoyne River and were encroaching upon the irrigated areas where they could become a serious threat to tropical agriculture.

Mesquite, or algaroba, as it is sometimes called, is native to Mexico and the southern portions of the U.S.A.

Because it is hardy and drought-resistant and produces seed-pods which are both palatable and nutritious to livestock, the tree has been introduced into many countries, including Australia.

Most strains of mesquite carry sharp spines from half an inch to three inches in length, but some varieties are almost spineless and it is

believed that most of the trees introduced into our North-West were originally spineless but have since reverted.

Professor W. Phillips, Professor of Botany at the University of Arizona, who is at present in Western Australia has graphically described the "explosive" nature of this plant. In Arizona where the tree is indigenous, it suddenly commenced to spread about 50 years ago and today 9,000,000 out of 15,000,000 acres of desert grassland in that State have been rendered useless by mesquite.

The tree develops a taproot which will go down 20ft or more in two years from the seedling stage and it also sends out a dense network of surface roots which make it impossible for grass to grow near the trees.

At Mardie Station near Onslow, mesquite has already taken possession of 36 square miles of pastoral country, choking out grasses and edible shrubs.

Every effort should be made to eradicate mesquite from the Carnarvon area, lest this district should prove a source of widespread infestations, said the Minister. Prompt action is needed while the infested area is small enough to be handled.

In America, despite the expenditure of thousands of dollars and the institution of extensive research programmes, no economical methods of eradicating mesquite had yet been evolved.

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