



Department of  
Primary Industries and  
Regional Development

## Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3

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Volume 8  
Number 2 March - April 1959

Article 4

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1959

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#### Recommended Citation

Shilkin, J. (1959) "Winter dysentery," *Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3*: Vol. 8: No. 2, Article 4.

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# WINTER DYSENTERY

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

**A** FORM of infectious diarrhoea of cattle, accompanied by a marked decline in milk production was reported from the Mundijong area of Western Australia in early September, 1958. The disease spread rapidly, and within a few days, further outbreaks were reported by private veterinary practitioners at Pinjarra, Coolup, Cookernup and Harvey.

Most of the cattle exhibited at the Perth Royal Show, which commenced on September 26, contracted the disease, both beef and dairy breeds being affected. In general, the infection was mild in the case of beef breeds but some dairy cattle were seriously affected.

Subsequently, the disease spread rapidly and extensively, and few herds in the dairying and beef-raising areas in the South-West of the State escaped infection.

## PREVIOUS HISTORY

The disease bears a marked similarity to the condition known as "winter dysentery" which had been previously reported from Canada, the U.S.A., Sweden and India.

The first recorded outbreak in Australia occurred near Sydney, N.S.W., in June, 1958. It spread to the South Coast and Hunter Valley districts and thereafter spread widely throughout New South Wales.

During September, 1958, a report from the Director, Division of Animal Industry, Queensland, gave details of an outbreak at the Royal National Exhibition in Brisbane early in August and its subsequent spread in Queensland.

Unofficial reports were also received of similar outbreaks in South Australia and Victoria.

It is unlikely that the disease had been present in Australia for any length of time prior to the outbreaks being recorded in New South Wales.

There is no suspicion attached to the few cattle importations into New South Wales from Great Britain and Canada.

In an effort to trace the source of the entry of the disease into Western Australia, lists were obtained from livestock agents of all cattle imported from the

Eastern States since the beginning of the year. Owners of these cattle were then circularised and asked to advise whether any of the animals showed symptoms of diarrhoea subsequent to importation.

From the replies, received, there is no evidence that any of these imported animals was responsible for introducing the disease into this State. Although several either subsequently became affected or were in herds where the disease occurred, the evidence indicated that the infection was most likely contracted at the Royal or later country Shows, or from infection already present in the districts concerned.

## SYMPTOMS

Symptoms shown by individual animals commenced with a slight but readily observable watery discharge from the eyes and nose, and loss of appetite. Shortly afterwards, a profuse watery dark green diarrhoea developed, which sometimes contained flecks or large quantities of blood. Diarrhoea or dysentery continued for one or two days then gradually cleared up without treatment. The duration of the illness was usually from three to five days. There was a mild temperature reaction in the initial stages, never more than 104° Fahrenheit, but when the animals were scouring, the temperature was either normal or sub-normal.

Animals of all ages from calves upward were infected. The dry stock appeared to be less susceptible than lactating animals.

An outstanding feature of the disease was its highly infectious nature. Within a matter of days, almost all the cattle in a herd were infected, and usually two to three weeks elapsed between the first appearance and the disappearance of the disease from the herd.



The effect on milk production in dairy herds was severe. In the majority of herds, there was a drop of one-third to one-half of the total production for three or four days, followed by a gradual rise almost to previous levels. Cattle which were in the later stages of lactation rarely returned to production at all.

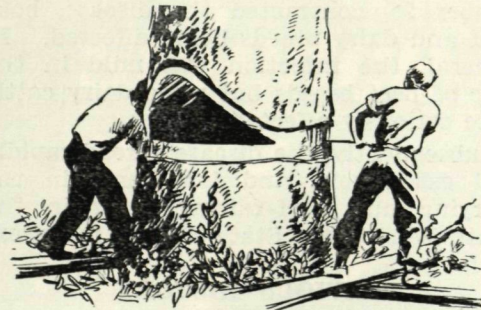
In New South Wales, transmission of the disease was effected by drenching with faeces, and by the subcutaneous injection of a bacteria-free filtrate and the incubation period was found to vary from two to nine days.

In Western Australia the Veterinary Pathologist successfully transmitted the disease by means of a subcutaneous injection of a bacteria-free filtrate and oral administration of faeces. Results of oral administration of bacteria-free filtrate were negative, as was the oral administration of faeces to a sheep. In both successful transmissions the incubation period was approximately five days.

### RECURRENCE POSSIBLE

While cases of the disease have occurred fairly recently in this State, the tendency is for outbreaks to decline and disappear with the advent of high temperatures and dry summer conditions.

From the pattern of the disease in countries outside Australia however, it is possible that it will recur in dairying areas during subsequent winter and spring periods.



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