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Atypical cutaneous actinobacillosis in young beef cattle


ACTINOBACILLOSIDIS is a sporadic, inflammatory disease of the soft tissue in cattle, sheep, goats (Swarbrick 1967, Fubini and Campbell 1983, Muhammad and others 2006, Radostits 2007) and other species (Dibb and others 1981, Carmalt and others 1999, Kennerman and others 2006). The causative organism, Actinobacillus lignieresii, is part of the oral flora (Rycroft and Garside 2000, Quinn 2002) and invades mucosal surfaces following trauma caused by abrasive ingesta or the action of the teeth during mastication (Radostits 2007). In cattle, the disease typically involves the formation of pyogranulomas in the oral cavity, tongue or fore-stomachs with subsequent spread to regional lymph nodes (Hebeler and others 1961, Mortimer 1962, Rycroft and Garside 2000), although the skin of the head, neck and, occasionally, the limbs can also be affected. An unusual presentation of the disease is reported here where extensive distal limb involvement resulted in severe lameness in 20 of 130 animals on a beef fattening unit.

The cases occurred in a group of one- to two-year-old Aberdeen Angus crossbred cattle over an 11-month period from when the animals were housed in October 2009 until the following August 2010. Affected animals were housed in groups of 30 to a pen in slatted units at a stocking density of 1 animal/2 metre². The cases presented clinically as focally extensive unilateral firm swellings distal to the elbow/stifle regions of the fore and hind limbs, resulting in significant lameness. In three animals, multiple limbs were involved. Affected animals lost varying degrees of body condition over a number of weeks due to reduced mobility. All affected animals were treated with parenteral antibiotics including seven-day treatments of penicillin–streptomycin (Penstrep orbrol) and five-day treatments of amoxicillin–clavulanic acid (Noroclav, norbrook). Approximately 40 per cent of treated cases recovered sufficiently for the animals to be sent for slaughter, 40 per cent improved transiently before relapsing once treatment was terminated, and in the remaining 20 per cent, there was no response to treatment.

Two Aberdeen Angus-cross bullocks, (a yearling, animal A and two year old, animal B), exhibiting typical distal limb lesions which had received no treatment, were referred to the University Veterinary Hospital, University College Dublin for further investigation. On clinical examination, both animals were in good body condition and had non-weight-bearing lameness of their affected limbs. Extensive firm swellings extending from the right stifle to the coronary band were noted in both animals (Fig 1). These animals were euthanased on welfare grounds and submitted for necroscopy examination.

On necroscopy examination, animal A had a focal, circumscribed, raised, ulcerated lesion in the skin overlying and involving the right precrural lymph node (Fig 2). On sectioning, this lesion contained yellow foci measuring 1–2 cm in diameter (‘sulphur’ granules) within a dense fibrous stroma (Fig 3). Diffuse circumferential subcutaneous oedema and fibrosis extended from the right stifle to the digits, with multifocal small ‘sulphur’ granules scattered throughout. Prominent, firm, raised, tortuous tracts were evident from the skin surface, consistent with chronic lymphangitis. Similar lesions were present in animal B without regional lymph node involvement.

Histopathological examination of the cutaneous lesions revealed multiple pyogranulomatous foci within the dermis and subcutis
centred on densely clustered basophilic coccobacilli surrounded by radiating mantles of eosinophilic ‘clubs’. These were surrounded by neutrophils, macrophages and multinucleate giant cells within a thick fibrous stroma. Similar pyogranulomas were noted in the capsule of the right precrural lymph node. A lignieresii and Staphylococcus aureus were isolated from the precrural lymph node of the younger bullock (Campbell and others 2002). Two cattle, however, lameness was not a reported feature (Holzhauer and Roumen 2002). A tallispyogenic actinobacillosis was transmitted through infected saliva during allo- or autogrooming, with the pathogen entering the skin through small percutaneous injuries, and the histopathological appearance of the lesions was highly characteristic of those associated with A lignieresii infection. However, given that S aureus results in pyogranuloma formation (botryomycosis) following wound infection in horses and pigs (McClain 1995), its additional presence may have increased the severity of the lesions in this case.

Successful medical treatment of cutaneous actinobacillosis has been reported in the literature. Chronic cutaneous lesions in three animals responded well to a two- to four-week course of procaine penicillin and dihydrostreptomycin or streptomycin and dihydrostreptomycin (Miline and others 2001).

This ‘outbreak’ of cutaneous actinobacillosis involving the lower limbs of young cattle was atypical in the numbers of animals involved and the distribution of the lesions. Actinobacillosis should be considered in the differential diagnosis of firm cutaneous lesions on the limbs that present with lameness. Reduction of stocking density and identification and removal of potential sources of trauma within animal housing units are suggested control/prevention strategies.

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