

Human brucellosis still a serious problem

WASHINGTON, D.C. — With calving and farrowing seasons now underway, farmers and ranchers should be aware that brucellosis still poses some risk to human health. Assisting animals at birth is one way people may become exposed to this disease.

Thanks to pasteurization of milk and progress in eradicating the disease in livestock, human brucellosis (sometimes called undulant fever) is no longer a scourge of rural areas.

"But it's still considered an occupational risk for certain people," said Dr. Paul Becton, director of the national brucellosis eradication program for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

According to Dr. Becton, the disease now occurs most frequently in packing plant workers, livestock producers, and veterinarians — the people most likely to handle infected animals or their carcasses.

The early 1970's saw a rise in human cases, from 175 in 1973 to 354 in 1975 — a doubling in just two years. This increase was closely linked with a resurgence of the disease in cattle — a trend which has since been reversed.

"When plotted on a chart," said Dr. Becton, "the human infection rate closely follows the trend (generally downward) in cattle infection. (See charts.)"

"Through the cooperative efforts of state-federal animal health workers and producers," said Dr. Becton, "the infection rate in cattle is now down to one-half of one per cent compared with a five per cent rate 20 years ago. Similarly, reported human cases are now below 300 a year — a fraction of the 6,400 cases reported in 1947."

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), U.S. Public Health Service, has an active interest in human brucellosis. HEW's Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta carries brucellosis as a reportable disease in its weekly tabulations on morbidity and mortality. CDC also issues an annual summary of brucellosis surveillance.

Since 1960, CDC notes that most human brucellosis in this country has been of swine origin. In two recent years (1975 and 1976), however, cattle-related cases exceeded swine-related cases.

CDC figures show that brucellosis predominately affects men between the ages of 20 and 60. This is the age category of the working force in this country, the group most likely to acquire brucellosis in the meat packing and livestock industries.

According to CDC, the most probably source of exposure to workers in the meat processing industry is swine. But, for workers in the livestock industry — producers, veterinarians, market employees — the most probably source is cattle.

Dr. Becton noted there are no cases on record of people getting the disease by eating

meat. This is because the bacteria that cause brucellosis tend to localize in the reproductive tract and udder, parts that are removed at slaughter. Also, the bacteria are readily killed by normal cooking temperatures or pasteurization.

Some natural food advocates favor the use of raw rather than pasteurized milk. This preference for unpasteurized milk may, according to Dr. Becton, present some risk to these individuals.

In a recent 10-year period (1965-1974), the eating or drinking of unpasteurized dairy products accounted for some 190 human cases. However, only one-third of these was attributed to dairy products produced in this country, and none to commercially distributed products.

"Though uncommon today, human brucellosis is a serious disease," said Dr. Becton, "one that can cause much misery."

The disease is characterized by insidious onset of

fever, chills, sweats, weakness, pains, and aches. Weakness bordering on exhaustion is the most outstanding complaint in both acute and chronic cases.

Untreated, brucellosis in man can result in a debilitating, incapacitating illness of long duration with an occasional death.

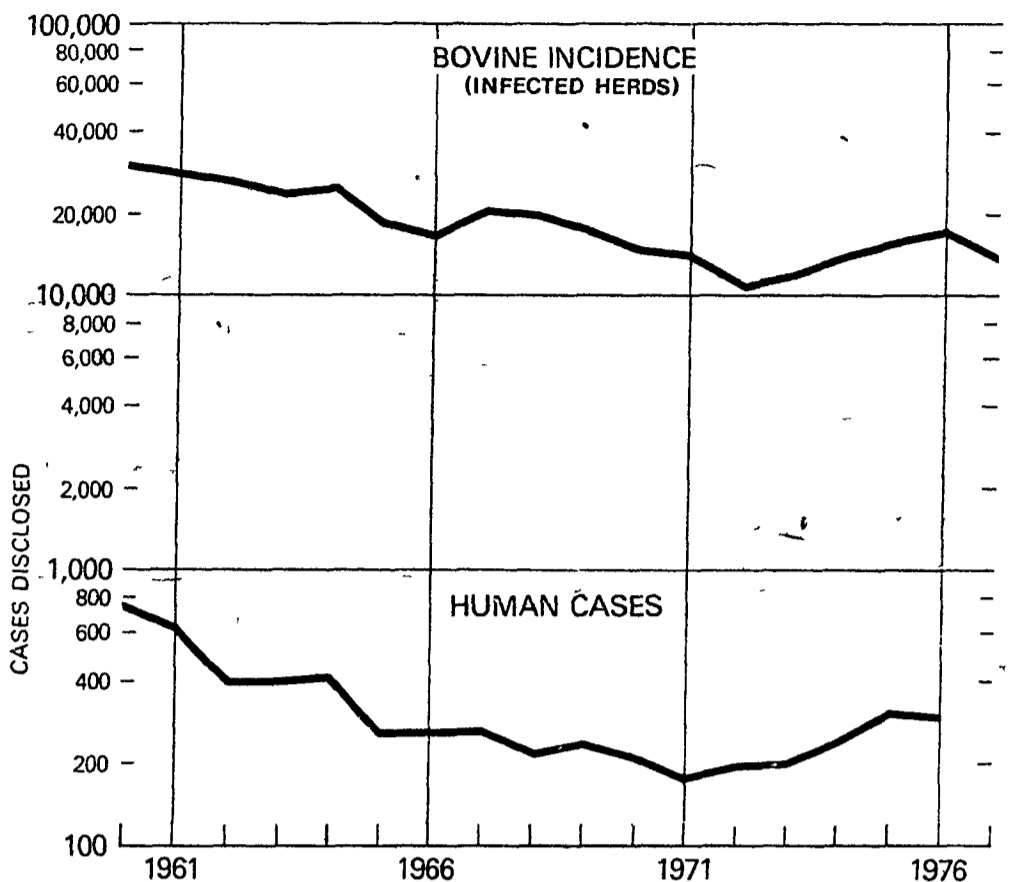
Diagnosis presents one of the difficult aspects of human brucellosis. Since the symptoms may only last from a few days to a week with each episode, they are commonly passed off as some form of "the flu" or other common infection.

Also, the time between exposure and the appearance of symptoms varies from a few days to several months; so the source of infection also may go unrecognized.

Chronic forms of brucellosis, especially, present diagnostic difficulties because the symptoms are characteristic of many disorders —

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BRUCELLOSIS: HUMAN CASES-BOVINE INCIDENCE

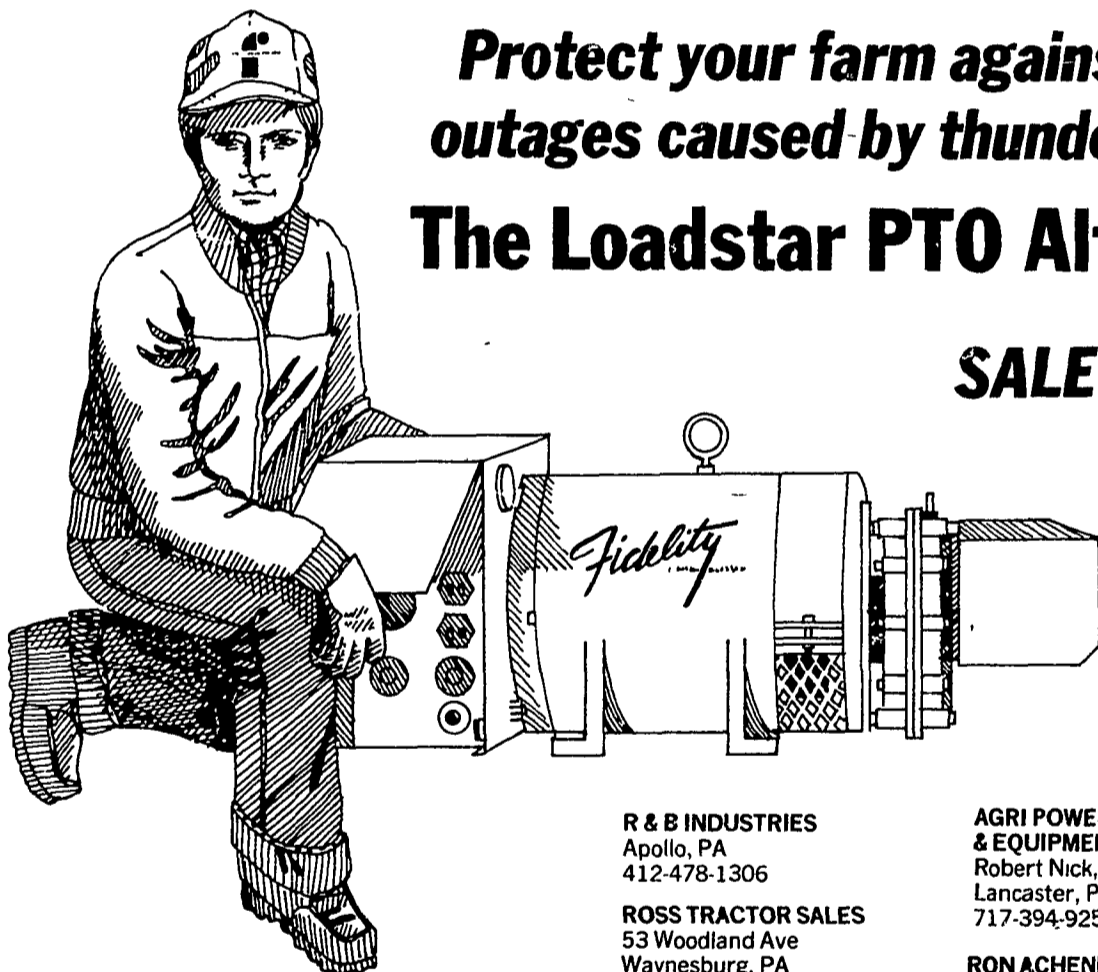


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