QUARANTINE - CHOLERA AND FOOT & MOUTH

In this last week matters have been raised in the Parliament which should be of real concern to every Australian and particularly to those in the farming and pastoral industries. One of the more important involves the cholera outbreak in West New Guinea.

As I understand it, this is the first time cholera has been discovered in West New Guinea or, for that matter, in any part of New Guinea. While the Dutch remained in West New Guinea we could be reasonably certain that strict and adequate quarantine measures would be imposed. This was, of course, vital not only for the people and animals in West New Guinea but also for the Australian part of New Guinea. It would not be possible, if quarantine measures failed on the coast, to establish adequate quarantine measures on the land border between East and West New Guinea. This is partly because the border is not well defined; partly because it goes through some very rough country, and partly because some diseases that could come into West New Guinea are spread by means that would in no way respect land boundaries.

We have not yet been able to find out how the cholera outbreak began in West New Guinea. It is possible that cholera can be introduced by contaminated meat or by contaminated water. I have been told that it is not spread by personal contact by one person with another. The source of the outbreak was about 200 miles east of Hollandia and none of the United Nations or Indonesian personnel would have been to the village in which it occurred. This leads one to suppose that one of the paratroopers that were dropped into West New Guinea by the Indonesians may have introduced cholera. This, however, is just supposition and the actual reasons for the outbreak may never be known.

The United Nations was on the scene quickly and has isolated the area and most rigid controls are being imposed which will probably prevent cholera spreading.

From Australia's point of view, adequate quarantine measures to safeguard the health of livestock in New Guinea may be more important than quarantine to safeguard the people. This is because the diseases which could attack people are more easily controlled than are some of the diseases which could attack the animal population. The most important of these would be foot and mouth and footrot cattle disease. If foot and mouth was ever introduced to Australia, for example, the cost to this country could run into millions of £'s annually and it could rob us of important markets in overseas countries.

Foot and mouth is quite common in some of the Indonesian islands but not in all. It is common in Europe and occasionally there are outbreaks in the United Kingdom. However, because of the settled nature of the United Kingdom countryside, it has always been possible to isolate, control and eradicate foot and mouth when it has got into the United Kingdom.

You may ask why, if they can eradicate foot and mouth, does it continually recur from time to time. This is because of the means by which foot and mouth is spread. The chief means of spreading foot and mouth from the European continent to the United Kingdom has been by migrating birds. If an outbreak occurs in a part of Europe and if birds are present in the same district, just before they are due to migrate to Britain, they very often take the disease with them. Birds can carry foot and mouth by playing around in paddocks in which the cattle have been present or from perching on the backs of cattle which birds sometimes do.

It is obviously quite impossible to prevent this sort of thing. However, the cost of control and the cost of eradicating foot and
mouth in Britain every time an outbreak occurs is very heavy indeed.

Let us look at this position in relation to New Guinea. So far, foot and mouth disease has been kept out of West New Guinea. However, it is possible it could be introduced by contaminated meat or by the introduction of animals which are carrying the disease. If this occurs, it would be almost impossible, if not quite impossible, to prevent foot and mouth spreading from West to East New Guinea. It could so easily be carried by travelling birds as it is carried from Europe to the United Kingdom.

If foot and mouth did become present in New Guinea it would almost certainly appear in Northern Queensland and once in Northern Queensland it could spread to different parts of Australia.

One of the difficulties of our position would be that control and eradication measures would be very nearly impossible under the grazing conditions which are usual in Queensland, the Northern Territory or the Kimberleys. I understand that eradication measures involve the slaughter of all animals that have been in contact and the isolation for a certain period of all animals in the particular area. This would not be possible in Northern Australia where there are few fences and where cattle can retreat into inaccessible and very rough country.

There is another aspect of this matter which is most important. There are many markets in the world that will only accept meat from foot and mouth free areas. This is because there is a possibility that foot and mouth can be spread by the carcasses of chilled or frozen meat. There are some who say that it can be spread by canned meat.

The United States has banned all imports of chilled and frozen meat from the Argentine which used to be her largest supplier on the grounds that foot and mouth which is in the Argentine could spread to the United States. This is one of the reasons why our own meat sales to the United States have risen from a negligible amount five, six or seven years ago to about 46 million pounds worth last year. The United States Market could become closed to Australia if foot and mouth was ever introduced to this country.

These matters don’t need any emphasis to underline their importance. Australia is vitally concerned in this problem and this fact is evident to every farmer and agriculturist in Australia.

The Government has been in touch with the United Nations organization at present administering West New Guinea and also with the Indonesians about the problems involved in the maintenance of adequate quarantine restrictions on the coast of West New Guinea. If Australia was asked to help in the maintenance of such control measures I am quite sure the Government would see that we supplied any help for which we were asked. Meanwhile, the whole matter will be watched closely.
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