Outbreaks of contagious ecthyma in camels (Camelus dromedarius) in the Turkana district of Kenya

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Summary: Mortality among camel calves (Camelus dromedarius) is one of the most serious problems faced by camel herdsman and, although there are several reasons for this mortality, diseases play a major role. In an investigation of outbreaks of contagious ecthyma in camels in the Turkana district of Kenya, four outbreaks were detected involving only camel calves. The principal lesions were distinct or largely coalesced pustules on the mouth, nose and muzzle. Direct electron microscopy of infected scabs was used to confirm the presence of the virus. Secondary infection of the pustules was common in affected calves. Morbidity in affected herds was 100%, with no adult involvement. Affected calves were unable to suckle properly. In all outbreaks, there was a concurrent outbreak of contagious pustular dermatitis in goat kids in the same household. Contagious ecthyma is an important disease in camels, contributing to calf debility and eventually to high calf mortality.

KEYWORDS: Camels – Contagious ecthyma – Kenya – Outbreaks – Turkana.

INTRODUCTION

Contagious ecthyma in camels (Camelus dromedarius) is a parapoxvirus disease which has been described in Mongolia (4, 2), Somalia (3), the former Soviet Union (11) and the Sudan (1). Only one outbreak has been reported in Kenya (7). No investigation has been made in a specific camel-rearing area to determine the geographical spread of disease. As calf mortality is the most important health problem faced by camel herders (8), sometimes reaching 50%, it is important to examine any potential factor which may contribute to the debility of camel calves and hence to such mortality. Visits were therefore made to the Turkana district in Kenya, one of the principal camel-rearing areas in the country, and skin conditions were examined in several herds.

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