

Nocardioform Abortions Hit Kentucky by Denise Steffanus

Abortions from nocardioform placentitis in Kentucky this year may exceed record losses experienced in 1999. Nocardioform is a bacterial placentitis that shows virtually no symptoms until its advanced stage in late gestation, when it causes the mare's udder to bag up prematurely. The disease attacks blood-rich areas of the placenta, making it unable to support the fetus, which essentially "starves" to death as a result and thus aborts.

In 1999, the University of Kentucky reported 109 nocardioform abortions as of March 20, and the total number of abortions that year reached 144. Neil Williams, D.V.M., Ph.D., associate director of UK's Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, said on February 23 that abortions this year already have exceeded 100. "We're not really seeing anything that we judge to be out of the normal for these cases, we're just seeing more of them," he said.

Despite ongoing research into the disease, scientists are unable to pinpoint how mares are infected by the causative organisms: *Crossiella equi* and *Amycolatopsis*. "We're striving to come up with associations and risk factors that we can identify," Williams said. "If we can do that, we can start piecing together the puzzle of how they get this and what happens to make some horses get it and others not."

Tom Riddle, D.V.M., cofounder of Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital in Lexington and one of the first practitioners in 2001 to recognize mare reproductive loss syndrome (MRLS), said, "What we've seen with nocardioform over the years is that it does seem to go in cycles, with some years having larger numbers than others. And the numbers are certainly up this year."

What confounds veterinarians is the inability to detect nocardioform placentitis in its early stage. Mats Troedsson, D.V.M., Ph.D., director of the University of Kentucky's Maxwell H. Gluck Equine Research Center, is working to develop a blood test that he hopes will solve that dilemma. But until that is available, abdominal ultrasound is the only way to recognize the disease, but the diagnosis is tricky. "If you see it, you definitely know it's there," Riddle said, "But if you don't see it, you can't be confident that it's not there." Once premature bagging begins, treatment may or may not be effective to save the fetus, he said.

Because veterinarians do not know how a mare is exposed to nocardioform placentitis or the risk factors, no effective prevention exists. Riddle said it is not good medicine to place healthy mares on a drug regimen as a preventive measure, and he discouraged owners from ultrasounding mares when there is no indication of a problem. "The numbers [of cases] are so small that ... you could ultrasound an awful lot of mares and find absolutely nothing, trying to pick out one that might be affected," he said.

The Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory is preparing an up-to-the-minute report of the situation, which is expected to be released in the next few days. In the meantime, Williams cautioned horse men not to compare nocardioform placentitis to MRLS. "That would be a big mistake," he said. "This is not anywhere in the magnitude of MRLS."

Denise Steffanus is a contributing editor of *Thoroughbred Times*

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