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Laboratory study of Mycobacterium bovis infection in badgers and calves.

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Abstract

Two experiments with badgers infected with Mycobacterium bovis are described. In the first, badgers were infected by intravenous inoculation of a bovine isolate of M bovis. The course of the disease in these and its spread to healthy badgers and calves was monitored by clinical, immunological and bacteriological means. In the second experiment a group of naturally infected badgers were observed for a period of up to four years. They were found to excrete M bovis in their faeces for periods of between 165 and 1305 days before they died of tuberculosis or were killed. M bovis was also shed in the urine. The badgers in both experiments were examined regularly and blood samples were taken for complement fixation tests. Faeces, urine, pus and sputum were also collected for cultural and biological tests and the badgers were skin tested using Weybridge bovine and avian tuberculin. The skin tests were uniformly negative while the complement fixation test were positive in some infected badgers but gave very variable results. Only the isolation of M bovis gave a definite diagnosis of tuberculosis in the living badger but a number of badgers which were found to have tuberculosis at post mortem were not detected while alive by this method. Environmental samples from the yards, including badger faeces, soil, hay, scrapings from feeding bowls and water were regularly examined for the presence of M bovis but apart from faeces only one water sample was positive, indicating that the organism did not persist for long in the environment. In both experiments calves developed sensitivity to bovine tuberculin after six months' exposure to infected badgers. The experiments further demonstrate the potential of a badger population to become endemically infected with M bovis and to act as a source of infection for cattle.

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