Cull Rates of Dairy Cattle with Antibodies to Bovine Leukemia Virus

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ABSTRACT

The relationship of cull rate to age was investigated retrospectively in dairy cattle with and without antibodies to bovine leukemia virus (BLV). Banked sera from eight annual herd tests on one 200-cow herd were tested for presence of BLV antibodies by agar-gel immunodiffusion using the M, 51,000 glycoprotein antigen of BLV. Age-specific cull rates were computed for BLV-antibody-positive and antibody-negative cows yearly from 2 to 7 years of age. Cull rates, transformed by the Arc-sin square root, were analyzed by weighted regression. Transformed cull rates increased significantly as BLV-antibody-positive cows aged (one-tailed P = 0.023) but not as antibody-negative cows aged (one-tailed P = 0.59). A Mantel-Byar survival analysis showed significantly longer survival beyond 3.5 years of age among antibody-negative cows than among antibody-positive cows (P = 0.008).

INTRODUCTION

BLV has been shown to be the etiologic agent of enzootic bovine leukosis, a lymphoproliferative disease of cattle (13). Infection with the virus ordinarily is spread following close physical contact (14, 20) and is more likely to occur as an animal ages (3–5, 20). Other than the rare occurrence of clinical lymphoma in old cattle (19), effects of BLV per se on the host have been disputed. Trainin et al. found evidence for acquired immune deficiency related to low IgM production in leukotic cattle (21), but other studies failed to demonstrate such an association (12, 16).

In support of the latter studies, analyses of production variables of antibody-positive and negative cows found no evidence for a detrimental effect of infection on productivity (9, 10). Reports of prevalence rates of seropositive cattle, however, have consistently shown a decline or plateau from 4 to 8 years of age (3–5, 8). Possible explanations for this pattern include: (a) a low-prevalence cohort in the 4- to 8-year age group, as suggested by Huber et al. (8); (b) a decrease in incidence of seroconversion during this age range, which could explain a plateau but not a decline; or (c) higher culling pressure in seropositive cattle during this period.

While decreased incidence could cause a leveling-off of prevalence, it cannot, by itself, cause a decline in prevalence. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship of cull rates to age in antibody-positive and antibody-negative cows that were grouped into birth cohorts to control for possible cohort effects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Banked sera from 320 cattle bled in August of 1975 to 1982 in a closed Florida dairy herd (20) were tested for BLV M, 51,000 glycoprotein antibodies by agar-gel immunodiffusion, as described previously (4). Approximately 200 cows were milked in this herd, which had a 70% prevalence rate to BLV antibodies in adult cattle (4). Decisions to cull cows were based on criteria in standard use by dairy managers in North America. Cows were removed most commonly because their milk production was below a mean for the herd. Another common reason for culling was infertility; infertile cows were those that failed to conceive or that aborted repeatedly. Cows were removed also for various diseases and conditions that adversely affected milk production, such as mastitis, lameness, chronic pneumonia, or physical injury. Herdsmen had no knowledge of BLV-antibody status of cows. Prevalence, incidence, and cull rates of seropositive cattle were computed for each annual bleeding of 5 birth cohorts and for all cohorts pooled. Prevalence rates were calculated as the number of seropositive cattle divided by the number of cattle tested. Incidence rates during a year were calculated as the number of new seropositive cattle divided by the quantity: number of seronegative cattle beginning the year minus one-half of the seronegative cattle culled plus one-half of the seropositive cattle entering during the year. The data from which pooled rates were computed is presented in Table 1. Birth cohorts consisted of cows born between the 12 months from August 1 through July 31. Cull rates were transformed by Arc-sin of cull rate, where Arc-sin was expressed in radians and cull rate was the number culled during the year divided by the number present at the beginning of the year, and were analyzed by weighted regression analyses (18). Transformation was performed to linearize the relationship between probability of culling and age and to remove inequalities in variance of cull rates (18). Inequalities of variance arising from differing numbers of animals present at the beginning of each year were removed by assigning weights to proportions culled. These weights were the number at risk at the beginning of each test period. The data at age 6.5 in Table 1 were not used in the regression analyses because of the small number of negative cows at risk at this age. Full and reduced model F-tests were performed separately for seropositive and seronegative cattle to determine whether the Arc-sin of cull rate-to-age relationship differed among cohorts (18).

Regression analysis was used to test for differences between slopes of transformed cull rates for seropositive and for seronegative cows. Differing slopes, as measured by an F-test (18), was interpreted to indicate that differences in the hazard of being culled varied with age. Rates intersected at the age when seropositive and seronegative cows were equally likely to be culled.

Validity of the regression analysis depends on a parametric assumption. A second, nonparametric survival analysis was performed to check for lack of sensitivity of results due to possible violations of that assumption. The Mantel-Byar method (11) was chosen because it adjusts numbers at risk at the beginning of each year to reflect the fact that cows seroconverted during the study period.

RESULTS

Prevalence rates for pooled cohorts (Chart 1) and individual
cohort data presented by Huber et al. (8) also suggested, subtly, the same within-cohort pattern. In our study, however, cohort effects can be ruled out as an explanation for a relationship between BLV infection and mastitis, however, provide no support for this view (7, 9, 10).

A third possible explanation is that BLV infection has an effect on reproductive efficiency, similar to that for feline leukemia virus in the feline fetus (6). There are no reports substantiating this view; indeed, Van Der Maaten et al., found no effect of BLV infection per se on bovine fetuses (23), and Huber et al. (9) and

**DISCUSSION**

This interesting finding of increasing cull rates with age in BLV-seropositive compared with seronegative cattle contrasts with results of Huber et al. (8), who found annual proportions of seronegative and seropositive cows retained in a herd to be similar. Design of that study, however, included large numbers of young cattle, which may have caused a dilution of a BLV effect on culling older cows and which could account for the discrepancy. Moreover, differences in yearly age-specific rates were not examined for cows over 5 years of age; one rate only was computed for all cows over 60 months of age.

Prevalence rate patterns found here are similar to those reported in the other longitudinal and one-time cross-sectional studies cited above. Cohort data presented by Huber et al. (8) also suggested, subtly, the same within-cohort pattern. In our study, however, cohort effects can be ruled out as an explanation for the dip or plateau in rates.

One interpretation of results of this study is that presence of BLV infection may increase the probability of culling through an effect on productivity, perhaps from impairment of physiological processes by the presence of subclinical amounts of neoplastic tissue. Tumor progression could result in low milk yield and, thus, the subsequent culling of the affected cow during the lactation period, a process which might cause relatively high rates of culling in BLV antibody-positive cattle. As a consequence, effects of BLV would be manifest during the subsequent lactation period, and cows with productivity affected by BLV would be absent at the anticipated completion of a lactation period. Indeed, studies which found no association between presence of BLV antibodies and productivity (9, 10) considered only cows which had completed a lactation.

This interpretation is supported by results of Bloom et al. (2), who found a reduction in B-lymphocytes and subsequent progression to tumorous state in lymphocytotic cows given glucocorticoids. A heightened adrenocorticoid response is easily conceivable in dairy cows during the stressful postparturient period.

A second interpretation of our results is that BLV infection in cows may cause an acquired immune deficiency, such as reduced lgM (21), which may lead to reduced productivity and subsequent culling. This is an intriguing possibility, in view of recent evidence for an association of human T-cell leukemia virus with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (1, 17) and a weak antigenic cross-reactivity between human T-cell leukemia virus and BLV core proteins (15). Furthermore, another retrovirus, feline leukemia virus, has been shown to cause immunosuppression in cats (22). Should an acquired immune deficiency explain all or part of the increased cull rates in BLV-infected cows, other infectious diseases would be expected to be more prevalent in BLV-infected cows. Results of studies which found no evidence for a relationship between BLV infection and mastitis, however, provide no support for this view (7, 9, 10).

A third possible explanation is that BLV infection has an effect on reproductive efficiency, similar to that for feline leukemia virus in the feline fetus (6). There are no reports substantiating this view; indeed, Van Der Maaten et al., found no effect of BLV infection per se on bovine fetuses (23), and Huber et al. (9) and
that culling is not related only in an independent way to BLV of 5 birth cohorts. Largest number in a cohort = n. Culling and BLV infection. In a shared factor which itself predisposes to Längstenef a. (10) found no differences in reproduction indices rates of BLV antibody-positive (A) and antibody negative (O) dairy cattle for each economic impact on the dairy industry. We speculate that the most AIDS, suggests that further research with BLV in the bovine model may be fruitful. Long-term prospective studies of survival of BLV-infected cattle will be needed before cause-and-effect questions regarding morbidity and mortality can be appropriately addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank N. Becker for use of banked sera, M. Burridge for encouragement, and G. Theilen, D. Bemocco, and T. Davis for critical review of the manuscript.

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