

Hey Neighbor



## For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

### Respiratory Pneumonia Threatens Foals

All foals are susceptible to *Rhodococcus equi* pneumonia.

Actually, it is the most prevalent life-threatening lower respiratory disease in young foals. However, horse owners are often unfamiliar with the problem, and they do not realize their foals are at risk.

"*Rhodococcus equi* is a bacterium that can produce pneumonia in horses, and it occurs primarily in foals,"

briefed Dr. Jim Speer, veterinarian at Equine Surgery & Medicine in Wichita.

"While its presence would be unknown, the soil-borne bacteria can live in an environment for considerable length of time and then be spread through dust particles in fecal material," Speer continued. "It is very endemic on certain farms."

High concentrations of mares and foals in a small

area would be a prime location for the problem, but it can occur in open pastures as well. "High moisture conditions seem to increase the risk," Speer added.

In 2006, the spring and early summer were fairly dry, and there were few cases identified. However, with higher moisture conditions this year, there has been a greater incidence.

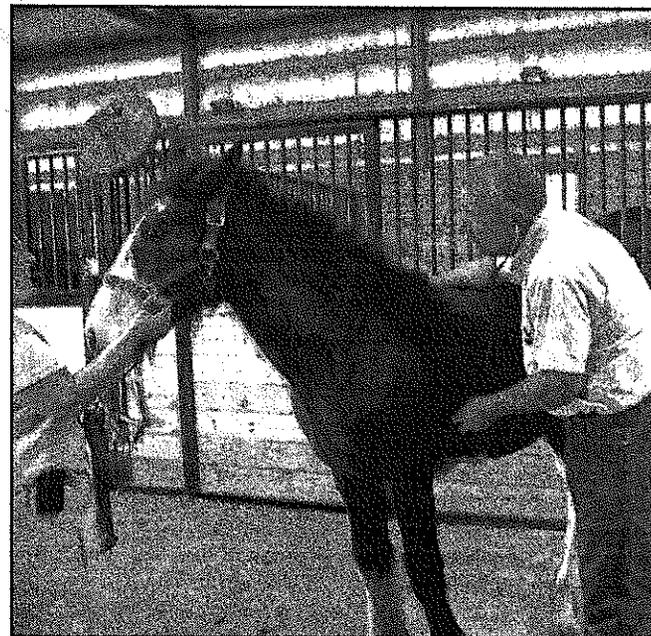
Although the bacteria may be harbored in the

lungs for a considerable length of time, typically there are no clinical signs until the foal reaches two to five months of age.

"The foal may lack appetite, act dull and sluggish, have a fever and increased respiratory effort," the veterinarian described. "A blood profile and chest x-ray are essential for a definite diagnosis."

Death loss has been as high as 30 to 50 percent in the past, according to Speer. "However, with the advent of new antibiotics in recent years, aggressive treatment, including intravenous plasma transfusions, has reduced losses significantly," he explained.

"A veterinarian must be contacted immediately when any of the clinical signs are evident," Speer emphasized. "Time is of essence in treating this ailment."



Dr. Jim Speer, veterinarian at Equine Surgery & Medicine in Wichita, checks vital signs on a foal suspected of having *Rhodococcus equi* pneumonia. All foals are susceptible to the life-threatening lower respiratory disease.

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Treatment may be necessary for two months or longer depending on the response, added Speer, who lost a foal to the pneumonia several years ago.

"I had mares and foals in this pasture for many years without a problem," he elaborated. "Evidently the bacteria had been in the soil, and the wet environment conditions were right this time for it to manifest. I started treatment as soon as the diagnosis was made, but I was still unable to save that foal."

Even though complete prevention may not be possible, Speer made several recommendations to reduce the risks of *Rhodococcus equi* pneumonia.

On farms with a history of the problem, physical examinations, temperature measurement and diagnostic imaging to detect early pulmonary lesions were recommended.

"It's important to make sure that horses are not kept in overly crowded conditions," Speer said. "Manure should be removed frequently.

"Efforts need to be made to remove all organic mate-

rial on the mare's udder prior to and immediately following delivery," he clarified. "That mode of transmission in the majority of cases involves ingestion of the bacteria by the foal shortly after birth."

The foal must get an adequate supply of immunoglobulins from the colostrum in the mare's milk to provide high levels of immunity, according to Speer.

For mare owners desiring to do everything they can to eliminate the risk, Speer insisted, "Intravenous transfusions with hyper-immune plasma in the first five days of a foal's life are very effective.

"This is not fail-safe, but it is the only proven method to control the bacteria," Speer indicated. "The transfusions also help prevent other diseases as well."

Consistent monitoring of the foal's temperature during the first 90 days is essential in early identification of foal diseases.

The old saying, "It's better to be safe than sorry," applies as a recommendation by Speer to mare owners for preventing loss of a foal due to *Rhodococcus equi* pneumonia.

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