

Rapid communications

SUSTAINED INTENSIVE TRANSMISSION OF Q FEVER IN THE SOUTH OF THE NETHERLANDS, 2009

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The Netherlands is again facing a sharp increase in Q fever notifications, after the unprecedented outbreaks of 2007 and 2008. The most affected province of Noord Brabant has a high density of large dairy goat farms, and farms with abortion waves have been incriminated. Mandatory vaccination of small ruminants has started and should have an effect in 2010. A large multidisciplinary research portfolio is expected to generate better knowledge about transmission and additional control measures.

Introduction

Q fever is a zoonosis caused by the obligate intracellular bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*. Cattle, sheep and goats are the primary animal reservoir, but the causative agent has also been noted in many other animal species. Infected goats and sheep may abort, mainly in late pregnancy. The bacterium is shed in urine, faeces, milk and in especially high concentrations in placentas and birth fluids of infected animals. Bacteria are transmitted to humans mainly through the aerosol route, resulting in subclinical infection, a flu-like syndrome with abrupt onset of fever, pneumonia or hepatitis, after an incubation period of two to three weeks [1]. People with underlying conditions, especially heart valve lesions, are more susceptible to developing chronic Q fever. Endocarditis, the most common form of chronic Q fever is estimated to occur in about 1% of acute Q fever cases.

Since 1978, when Q fever in humans became a notifiable disease in the Netherlands, until 2006, the number of notifications had ranged between 1 and 32 cases annually, with an average of 17 cases per year [2]. However, in 2007, Q fever emerged as an important human and veterinary public health challenge with large epidemics in the southern part of the Netherlands [3]. In 2007, 168 human cases were notified and in 2008 exactly 1,000 human cases were registered (Figure 1). Notification criteria for acute Q fever are a clinical presentation with at least fever, or pneumonia, or hepatitis and confirmation of the diagnosis in the laboratory. Currently, the laboratory criteria are a fourfold rise in IgG antibody titre against *C. burnetii* in paired sera or the presence of IgM-antibodies against phase II antigen. Identification of *C. burnetii* in patient material with a PCR test will soon be added

to the notification criteria. Notification of probable cases, defined as clinical signs with a single high antibody titre is voluntary.

Current situation

From April 2009, a sharp increase in Q fever was observed again, and a total of 345 cases (including 13 probable) were notified between 1 January and 11 May 2009 (Figure 1). For 11 cases, the date of illness onset was in 2008 and one case fell ill in 2007, resulting in a total of 333 cases with confirmed or presumed illness onset in 2009. The overall male-to-female ratio for these 333 cases was 1.7:1 with a median age of 49 years (IQR 38-61 years).

The epidemic curve for 2009 shows an even steeper increase in case numbers in April-May, than in the previous two years, suggesting that an epidemic of at least the same magnitude as the one in 2008 is imminent. While most cases reside in the same region in the province of Noord-Brabant as the cases reported in 2007 and 2008 (see map in reference 3), the geographic area seems to be expanding (Figure 2).

Clinical features and diagnostics

Pneumonia is the predominant clinical presentation of the Q fever cases in the Netherlands. For those patients notified in 2008 for whom clinical details were available, 545 presented with pneumonia, 33 with hepatitis, and 115 with other febrile illness (data not yet analysed in detail). Of the 226 cases in 2009 where data regarding hospitalisation were available, 59 (26%) had been admitted to a hospital, a percentage comparable to figures in 2008, but lower than the proportion of patients hospitalised in 2007 (49%). Clinical follow-up of patients that were diagnosed with acute Q fever in 2007, shows that Q fever is not always a mild disease of short duration, as many cases still suffered from persisting fatigue several months after disease onset [4]. We have no clear information about the occurrence of other chronic sequelae, such as endocarditis at this stage.

The medical microbiology laboratories in the affected region have jointly formulated diagnostic recommendations. Cases are currently diagnosed with immunofluorescence assays (Focus

Diagnostics), in-house complement fixation tests or ELISA. Real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests were developed by eight medical microbiology laboratories and the most sensitive (98%) PCR has been selected and has proven a valuable additional tool for early diagnosis of acute Q fever in the time window before seroconversion.

Increased alertness of general practitioners together with easy availability of diagnostic services certainly has an impact on the number of notifications. The current epidemic curve based on week of notification reflects a more real time situation than in previous years, as the interval between date of illness onset and date of diagnosis has decreased from a median of 77 days in 2007 (IQR 40-121) and 29 days (IQR 19-45) in 2008 to 17 days in 2009 (IQR 12-24 days).

Separate clusters with multiple sources

It is becoming increasingly clear that the overall outbreak consists of at least 10 separate clusters with multiple sources, mainly in the province of Noord Brabant. For some clusters a clear epidemiological link could be established to small ruminant farms with clinical Q fever cases in animals presented as abortion waves. For other clusters such a link was less obvious. An example of the latter is a medium sized city (87,000 inhabitants) that experienced a second Q fever outbreak in 2009 similar to the one in 2008. In 2008, a dairy goat farm with abortions due to Q fever was suspected as the source, but in 2009 there were no veterinary notifications from the area. The 73 notified human cases residing in the city were clustered in the same part of the city as the cases that were notified in 2008. It remains unclear whether the same source is involved, whether the bacteria have persisted and survived in the local environment, whether the primary source in 2008 has resulted in secondary sources in 2009, or whether there is increased awareness among health professionals in this part of the city based on the 2008 experience.

In March 2009, the Animal Health Service reported a Q fever-positive farm in the province of Limburg with more than a thousand goats. The place also serves as a care farm for young people with mental disabilities who work there as part-time farmhands. Prompted by this notification, the municipal health service (MHS) South Limburg performed active laboratory screening by ELISA of the individuals affiliated to this goat farm. The screening, which involved a total of 96 people, has resulted in 28 notified symptomatic cases to date.

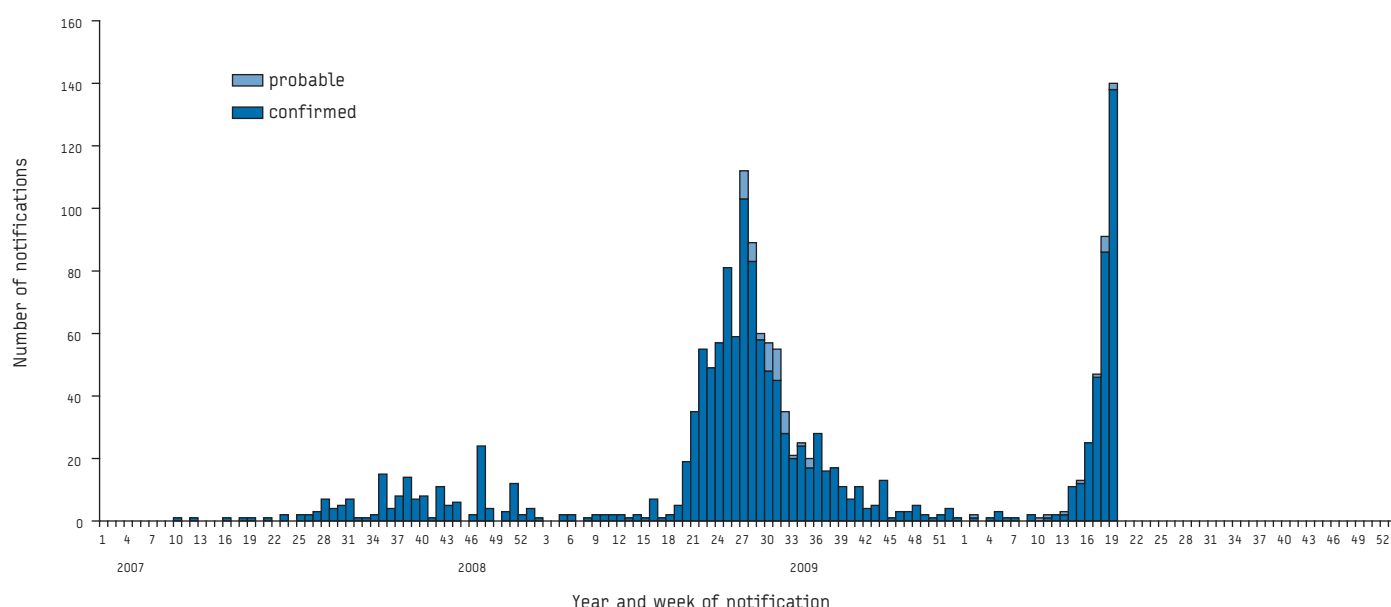
Veterinary situation

The total number of registered small ruminant farms in the Netherlands is 52,000, of which 350 are professional dairy goat farms with more than 200 adult goats and 40 are professional dairy sheep farms. In 2005, Q fever was diagnosed for the first time as a cause of abortion at a dairy goat farm, using immunohistochemistry on sections of placenta [5]. A second case was diagnosed later in 2005. In 2006, 2007 and 2008, six, seven and seven new cases at dairy goat farms were confirmed, respectively, mainly in the same area where human cases occurred. In the same period, two cases of abortion caused by *C. burnetii* were confirmed at dairy sheep farms, one in the southern and one in the northern part of the country but these two cases do not seem to be related to human cases. Analyses of abortion outbreaks showed that the average number of goats per farm was 900 of which 20% aborted, ranging from 10-60%. The average number of sheep on both infected sheep farms was 400 and the abortion rate was 5%.

Abortion outbreaks before June 2008 were reported on a voluntary basis to the Animal Health Service and also confirmed by immunohistochemistry. Since June 2008, notification of Q fever in goats and sheep is mandatory in the Netherlands. There is a legal requirement for farmers and their private veterinary surgeons to notify the occurrence of abortion in small ruminants held in deep litter houses. For large farms (>100 animals) the notification

FIGURE 1

Q fever notifications by week of notification, 1 January 2007 - 11 May 2009, the Netherlands (2007: n=168, 2008: n=1000, 2009 [week 1-week 19]: n=345)



criterion is an abortion wave defined as an abortion percentage higher than 5% among pregnant animals. For smaller holdings, a criterion of three or more abortions in a 30-day period is used.

From January to April 2009, this new regulation has led to notification of three dairy goat farms with clinical cases of Q fever. One farm is located in the province of Overijssel (notified in February), one in the south of the province of Limburg (notified in March), and one in the province of Noord-Brabant (notified in April).

This veterinary notification can potentially facilitate the detection of related human cases or clusters. Veterinarians, physicians and the public are informed through targeted mailings, publications and the media. The exact location of animal farms with clinical Q fever is now reported to the municipal health service. In February 2009, a nationwide stringent hygiene protocol became mandatory for all professional dairy goat and sheep farms, independent of Q fever status.

Vaccination campaigns

In the fall of 2008, a voluntary vaccination campaign was implemented in the province of Noord Brabant. In total, about 36,000 small ruminants were vaccinated in an area with a radius

of 45 kilometer around Uden, a small town in the centre of the high-risk area.

Another, mandatory vaccination campaign led by the Animal Health Service (GD) started on 21 April 2009. From April to October 2009, 200,000 small ruminants will be vaccinated in an area which includes the province of Noord-Brabant and parts of the provinces of Gelderland, Utrecht and Limburg.

Ongoing research

Ongoing studies address the factors involved in the 2008 epidemic at a national, regional and local level, the efficacy of the 2008 voluntary vaccination campaign in small ruminants and the nationwide occurrence of *C. burnetii* antibodies in the community and in small ruminants. From the human epidemiological perspective, a case control study is currently underway in the two main affected MHS regions of 2009, 'Hart voor Brabant' and Brabant-Southeast. Routinely collected sera of pregnant women from the affected regions over the period June 2007 to July 2008 are retrospectively screened for Q fever to study the effect of infection on pregnancy outcome (registered in a national database). An integrated human-veterinary study was started, in which small ruminant farmers and their animals will be screened for presence of *C. burnetii* antibodies. In addition, environmental samples will be obtained from a subset of these farms and the role of particulate matter in relation to *C. burnetii* transmission will be further investigated.

Conclusion

For the third consecutive year the Netherlands is facing a large outbreak of Q fever. The new upsurge in Q fever cases in 2009 is alarming. The mandatory vaccination campaign among small ruminants that was started in April 2009, if effective, is expected to reduce the occurrence of abortion waves and excretion of *Coxiella* in the lambing season 2010. There is a large portfolio of ongoing multidisciplinary research, but it will take some time before results become available that eventually will lead to the implementation of extended and improved control measures.

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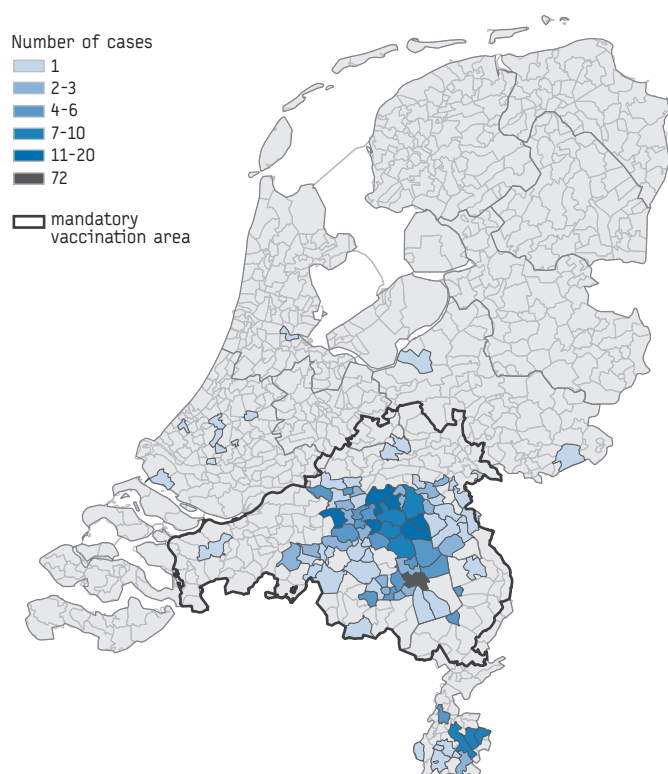
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FIGURE 2

Notified cases of acute Q fever in the Netherlands by three-digit postal code area, 1 January – 11 May 2009 (n=344*). The black line indicates the mandatory vaccination area covering the province of Noord Brabant and parts of the provinces of Gelderland, Utrecht, and Limburg.



Source: OSIRIS notification system. Map compiled by Ben Bom, Expertise Centre for Methodology and Information Services, RIVM
* For one case the information on postal code is missing