

***Dirofilaria immitis* in the Dingo (*Canis familiaris dingo*) in a Tropical Region of the Northern Territory, Australia**

T. W. Starr¹ and R. C. Mulley,² ¹ Ban Ban Springs Station, via Adelaide River, 5783, Northern Territory, Australia; ² Department of Veterinary Clinical Studies, The University of Sydney, Private Mailbag 3, Camden, 2570, New South Wales, Australia

ABSTRACT: The heart and lungs from 32 adult dingoes (*Canis familiaris dingo*) were examined for canine heartworm (*Dirofilaria immitis*) infection. Eighteen of 32 (56%) samples were infected, with intensity of infection ranging from 1 to 31 worms per animal. Seven of 18 (39%) infections were single sex infections. Large numbers of circulating microfilariae were present in blood from all dingoes infected with both sexes of worms.

Key words: Dingo, *Canis familiaris dingo*, heartworm, *Dirofilaria immitis*, survey.

Dirofilaria immitis is an important nematode parasite of domestic dogs (Kelly, 1978). Infections have been reported also in many species of wild canids including coyotes (*Canis latrans*) by Custer and Pence (1981), cape hunting dogs (*Lycaen pictus*) by Loomis and Lee (1984), gray foxes (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) by Hubert et al. (1982), red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) by Mulley and Starr (1984), and red wolves (*Canis rufus*) by Custer and Pence (1981). It has been reported infrequently also in a range of other mammals including domestic cats, horses and marine mammals (Kelly, 1978) and human beings (Merril et al., 1980).

Dirofilaria immitis occurs in dingoes (*Canis familiaris dingo*) in Australia (Kelly, 1978), but there are no reports on its prevalence. This paper reports the prevalence of canine heartworm in a sample of dingoes from a monsoonal region of the Northern Territory, Australia.

Thirty-two adult dingoes (19 male and 13 female) were shot on Ban Ban Springs Station (latitude 13°30'S, longitude 132°0'E), in the Northern Territory, Australia, over a 2-yr period as part of a dingo control program.

Immediately after collection of dingoes, the heart and lungs were removed and

examined for the presence of heartworms. Blood samples were collected also and examined for the presence of microfilariae using a filter technique described by Wylie (1970). There was no attempt to accurately age the animals sampled, although two were known to be ≤ 1 yr old based on collection date and size of the animal.

Eighteen of 32 (56%) dingoes examined were infected with *D. immitis*. Representative specimens of *D. immitis* were deposited in the South Australian Museum (North Terrace, Adelaide, South Australia, 5000, Australia; accession number V 4065). The prevalence of infection in female dingoes was 69% (9/13) and in males 47% (9/19). The intensity of infection ranged from 1 to 31 with a mean of 9.2 nematodes per host. Seven of 18 (39%) dingoes had single sex infections of heartworms and in all cases female worms were present. Patent infections, as exemplified by the presence of microfilariae in circulating blood, were detected in all dingoes infected with both sexes of *D. immitis*.

Ten of 18 infected dingoes (56%) had heartworms in the pulmonary artery and right ventricle; 3/18 dingoes (17%) had heartworms in the pulmonary artery only; 1/18 (6%) had heartworms in the right ventricle only; 3/18 (17%) had heartworms in the pulmonary artery, right ventricle and the pulmonary arterial tree of the lungs; and 1/18 (6%) had heartworms only in the pulmonary arterial tree of the lungs. A total of 117 worms was collected from 18 infected dingoes. Twenty-seven of the 117 worms (23%) recovered were males.

The prevalence of infection in the wild population of dingoes in this area of the Northern Territory is high, but the impact of infection in terms of morbidity and

mortality within the population is not known. The area sampled is part of an 1,800 km² property which is geographically isolated from the domestic dog population of Darwin, approximately 140 km to the north. There have been no domestic dogs resident on the property for at least 20 yr.

In all cases where circulating microfilariae were sought they were found in large numbers. Calvert and Losonsky (1985) reported that circulating microfilariae are not present in 10–67% of all canine heartworm infections of domestic dogs because of the host immune response. The dingo appears to be a suitable host for *D. immitis* based on the high prevalence of heartworms and patent infections in our study.

Custer and Pence (1981) found a 1:1 male to female ratio of heartworms in wild canids. However, in our study only 23% of worms recovered were male and in all individual cases where both sexes of the nematode were present the number of females was greater than the number of males.

The occurrence of heartworms in the pulmonary arterial tree of the lung in dingoes is consistent with the findings of Custer and Pence (1981) in coyotes and red wolves in the United States. In that study the location of nematodes in the lungs was usually associated with intensities of >15; this was also the case in our study. However, the one dingo that had nematodes present only in the lungs had an intensity of only two heartworms. There was no evidence of a pathological response in any of the dingoes examined, although hypertrophy of the right ventricle and extensive vascular sclerosis of the pulmonary artery is sometimes observed in domestic dogs and red foxes (Hennigan and Ferguson, 1957; Adcock, 1961; Hirth and Nielson,

1966). This was probably due to the low intensities of heartworms encountered in dingoes compared to those reported in other species.

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