Retrospective analysis of the epizootic situation of enzootic bovine leukosis in Ukraine in 1994–2019

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Keywords: bovine leukemia virus; cattle; epizootic process; serological studies; indicators of intensity and extensiveness.

In Ukraine, prevention and control measures of bovine leukosis were regulated by relevant legislation, regulations and instructions developed in the period 1960–1992. Currently, the instruction on prevention and rehabilitation of this disease in cattle is used (approved in 2007). According to it, the identification of infected animals is carried out from 6 months of age by serological (first scheme in AGID or another in ELISA) and genomic (PCR) methods. The infected animals are removed from the herd or slaughtered. In general, because of the diagnostic and preventive measures carried out during the analyzed period (26 years) 10 519 farms were rehabilitated from leukosis (2 346 affected farms remained from previous years). At the same time, more than 4 million infected cattle were slaughtered. The majority of affected farms (more than 1 000) were registered in the period between 1994 (2 346 farms) and 2003 (1 247 farms). Since 2014, the number of affected farms has remained mostly below 10 and the number of infected cattle has decreased to 2 000 animals per year. At the same time, the number of rehabilitated farms also decreased (from 307 farms in 1998 to 4 farms in 2014). The same trend was registered with the dynamics of the number of animals that were removed from the herd due to leukosis. Thus, in 1995 and 1997 their numbers were 321 178 and 558 649, respectively, and in 2014 it was 1 247.

The obtained indicators of intensity and extensiveness of the epizootic process show that the incidence rate was maximal during 1998–2000 and amounted to 3.7–4.3%. The maximum indicators of the coefficient of infection were recorded in 1997–2000 and equal 11.8–15.3%. The rate of foci remained on the level of 90–270 throughout the all analyzed period. During 2008–2019, specialists of the Ukrainian veterinary laboratories investigated more than 47 million samples of cattle blood sera for enzootic bovine leukosis by AGID and ELISA. However, despite the significant diagnostic work, the important factor in the decrease of the number of affected farms and infected animals is the decrease in the total number of cattle in Ukraine (almost 22 million animals in 1994 against 3 million in 2019). Graphic trends of these indicators are comparable and agree with the decrease in the number of cattle in our country by analyzed period. After 2014, the number of affected farms ranged 10–17 per year (mostly in private households). However, the full recovery of cattle from bovine leukosis has not taken place, although our country is closer than ever to this.

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recommended by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE, 2018) for the diagnosis of bovine leukosis as primary and can be used for research at the individual and population levels. The development of molecular genetic methods in the late 1990s enabled studies to be conducted on this disease which are based on the direct detection of DNA in whole blood leukocytes through use of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) (Naif et al., 1990). Currently, the following modifications of PCR were developed that allow detection of the bovine leukemia virus (BLV): nested PCR (Klintevall et al., 1994; Fechner et al., 1996) and real-time PCR (RT-PCR) (Rola-Luszczak et al., 2013). According to recommendation of OIE, these modifications have been recommended for the diagnosis of bovine leukosis as reference reactions (OIE, 2018). Molecular genetic methods allowed the presence of 10 different genotypes of BLV to be established in different countries (Polat et al., 2016). Genotypes 4, 7 and 8 circulate in Ukraine (Rola-Luszczak et al., 2013).

Historically, the systemic control for enzootic bovine leukosis and its prevention in the world began in 1960s. By this time, EBL was already a common disease in dairy herds in Northern and Eastern Europe and North America. In 1964, the first recommendations of OIE for this disease appeared. According to them, it was recommended for all countries to create programs for controlling the incidences of leukosis, to avoid trade with affected farms and to widely use hematological diagnostics for identification of sick animals (Berg et al., 2015). Subsequently, national eradication programs were adopted in most European countries that are based on the large-scale serological diagnosis by AGID and ELISA (More et al., 2017). In 2017, most countries of the European Union had the official free status concerning enzootic bovine leukosis by the criteria of OIE and the EU Council Directive of 64/432/EEC. According to these documents, more than 99.8% of cattle herds in the country should be free of leukosis. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Malta and some regions of Portugal remain not officially free of this disease (Fig. 1) (More et al., 2017).

In the United States, 46.5% of dairy herds are infected by BLV (LaDrunka et al., 2018). By comparison, this indicator in Canada is almost 90.0% (Nelouei et al., 2016). Leukosis is still registered in cattle from Asia (Yang et al., 2016) and North America (Polat et al., 2016). It also continues to be registered in countries neighbouring, Ukraine, including Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Turkey (Zubova et al., 2018; Makarov & Lozovoy, 2020).

Currently, there are no effective vaccines and schemes of treatment for infected animals, so the disease causes significant economic losses on farms, which include the reduction of the animals’ productivity and their removal from the herd. All of the above significantly inhibits the development of industrial livestock (OIE, 2018). Although EBL is currently not included in the list of zoonoses due to lack of evidences of the possibility of human infection caused by the virus, active research in this area is being conducted. According to the data of scientific literature, the potential of this disease as a zoonosis is quite significant (Axel, 2017; Juliarena et al., 2017; Buehring et al., 2019).

The experience of countries that have successfully acquired an official free status like Italy (Feliziani et al., 2018), Lithuania (Acute et al., 2007), Finland (Nuoto et al., 2003) and the study of successful implementation aspects of health measures in Croatia (Lojkic et al., 2013) and Japan (Kobayashi et al., 2020) confirms that the most effective methods of rehabilitation are periodic and systemic diagnosis by AGID and ELISA among livestock and removal from the herd or slaughter of infected animals.

In Ukraine, prevention and control measures of bovine leukosis were regulated by relevant legislation, regulations and instructions developed in period 1960–1992. Currently, the instruction on prevention and rehabilitation of this disease in cattle is used (approved in 2007). According to it, the identification of infected animals is carried out from 6 months of age by serological (first scheme in AGID or another in ELISA) and genomic (PCR) methods. The infected animals are removed from the herd or slaughtered (Mandyna, 2000). Evidence of the effectiveness of this strategy is demonstrated by the successful eradication of the disease in many Western European countries (Nuoto et al., 2003; Acute et al., 2007; Lojkic et al., 2013; Maresca et al., 2015; Feliziani et al., 2018).

However, despite the above-mentioned control and prevention measures, Ukraine has not officially been free of enzootic bovine leukosis for several decades. Therefore, taking into account the epizootic situation regarding bovine leukosis in Ukraine, the authors aimed to analyze the epizootiological aspects of this disease over the past 26 years (there are complete statistical reports on this disease for these years) and critically assess the achievements and problems in this area.

Materials and methods

The authors conducted a retrospective analysis of the epizootic situation regarding enzootic bovine leukosis in Ukraine over 1994–2019. For this purpose, we studied, systematized and analyzed the reports of regional laboratories of State Service of Ukraine on Food Safety and Consumer Protection (reporting form 1-Vet.) and obtained data of the State Scientific and Research Institute of Laboratory Diagnostics and Veterinary and Sanitary Expertise (SSRILDVSE, Kyiv, Ukraine) for the period 26 years.

Epizootiological and analytical research methods were used, and indicators of intensity and extensiveness of the epizootic process were analyzed (incidence rate, coefficient of affection, rate of foci).

The incidence rate was defined as the ratio of the quantity of infected by BLV animals to the total number of cattle susceptible to leukosis.

The coefficient of affection was defined as the ratio of the number of farms affected by BLV to the total number of farms.

The rate of foci was defined as the ratio of the quantity of infected cattle by BLV to the number of farms affected by this virus.

Information about the total number of susceptible cattle and farms was obtained from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine.

Results

Overall, during 1994–2019 about 4 million animals sick with enzootic bovine leukosis and 8 thousand farms affected by BLV were found in Ukraine. In general, because of the diagnostic and preventive measures carried out during the analyzed period (26 years) 10 519 farms were rehabilitated from leukosis (2 346 affected farms remained from previous years). At the same time, 4 389 114 infected cattle were slaughtered (Table 1).

The largest number of cattle infected by the bovine leukemia virus was registered in 1994 (474 596 animals), 1997 (404 704), 1998 (470 572), 1999 (505 591) and 2000 years (425 109 animals).

The majority of affected farms (more than 1 000) were registered in the same years: in 1994 – 2 346 farms, in 1995 – 1 801, in 1996 – 2 485, in 1997 – 3 703, in 1998 – 4 469, in 1999 – 4 011, in 2000 – 3 452, in 2001 – 2 454, in 2002 – 1 787, in 2003 – 1 247 farms. Graphic trends of these both indicators are comparable and logically agree (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Dynamics of affected farms and cattle infected by BLV by years (for convenience in the trends comparison, the number of livestock per million heads divided by conventional 100 units) according to reports of regional laboratories and SSRILDVSE.
As presented on Figure 1, both indicators have been declining rapidly since 1999. This trend continued until 2014, after which the values increased slightly, but the number of affected farms has remained below 10 (only in 2018, 17 were registered) and the quantity of infected cattle has decreased slightly, but the number of affected farms has remained below 10 thousand and in 2016 it was only 900 slaughtered animals. However, after the number of such animals increased again slightly and in 2019 amounted to 3 345 head (Fig. 2).

The obtained indicators of intensity and extensiveness of the epizootic process show that the incidence rate was maximal during 1998–2000 and amounted 3.7–4.3%. The maximum indicators of the coefficient of affection were recorded in 1997–2000 and equal 11.8–15.3%. The rate of foci remained on the level of 0.0–0.7 throughout the analyzed period.

It should be noted that the rates of incidence and affection began to decline particularly rapidly after 2007, when a new instruction was approved, which paid considerable attention to serological diagnostic methods (AGID, ELISA). Thus, from 2008 to 2019 inclusive, the values of these indicators were less than 1.0%, and after 2012 – above 0.1%.

The values of these coefficients are explained by the fact that at the beginning of 2007 in Ukraine 360 affected farms were registered, in which there were 60 229 head of cattle infected by BLV. The rate of foci was 167 animals per farm. The incidence rate in this year was 1.2% and the coefficient of affection – 1.0%. After the adoption and application of more effective and sensitive diagnostic methods, at the beginning of 2008 there were only 207 affected farms, which is 57.5% less than in the previous year, and 33 743 sick animals (almost twice less than in the previous year). Systematized results of serological investigation conducted after the approval of the current instruction of Ukraine regarding the prevention and rehabilitation of cattle from enzootic bovine leukosis in 2007 are presented in Table 2.

In total, for the period 2008–2019, more than 47 million blood sera samples from cattle were studied for EBL in Ukraine. As presented in Table 2, almost all of these sera samples were studied by the agar gel immunodiffusion assay (AGID). At the same time, 42 times fewer samples were examined by using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). However, despite such a significant difference in number of investigated samples, only 14 times fewer positive reactions were detected by ELISA (21 003 samples against 294 292). These results are primarily explained by the fact that samples by ELISA were mostly studied that had previous positive reactions by AGID ( arbitration or repeated research).

In addition, 77.6% of the total numbers of samples were tested by ELISA in 2019, when enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay test-systems began to be widely used in regional laboratories of the State Service of Ukraine on Food Safety and Consumer Protection.

| Years | Data as 01.01 of the current year | Data obtained during the year | Number of rehabilitated farms | Number of slaughtered cattle |
|-------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
|       | number of affected farms | number of infected cattle | number of affected farms | number of infected cattle |                           |                           |
| 1994  | 2 346                         | 474 596                      | 628                         | 206 307                   | 1 173                      | 443 505                     |
| 1995  | 1 801                         | 237 398                      | 1 278                       | 346 718                   | 934                        | 321 178                     |
| 1996  | 2 485                         | 262 938                      | 1 811                       | 493 111                   | 903                        | 351 345                     |
| 1997  | 3 703                         | 404 704                      | 1 798                       | 624 517                   | 1 032                      | 558 649                     |
| 1998  | 4 469                         | 470 572                      | 849                         | 578 837                   | 1 307                      | 543 818                     |
| 1999  | 4 011                         | 505 951                      | 625                         | 430 689                   | 1 184                      | 511 171                     |
| 2000  | 3 452                         | 425 150                      | 227                         | 360 264                   | 1 225                      | 502 096                     |
| 2001  | 2 454                         | 283 277                      | 82                          | 234 730                   | 749                        | 237 057                     |
| 2002  | 1 787                         | 280 950                      | 40                          | 163 357                   | 580                        | 230 049                     |
| 2003  | 1 247                         | 214 258                      | 204                         | 158 163                   | 554                        | 224 125                     |
| 2004  | 897                           | 148 296                      | 83                          | 100 756                   | 419                        | 135 878                     |
| 2005  | 561                           | 113 174                      | 157                         | 75 654                    | 222                        | 101 942                     |
| 2006  | 406                           | 86 886                       | 104                         | 48 477                    | 240                        | 75 134                      |
| 2007  | 360                           | 60 229                       | 134                         | 44 001                    | 287                        | 70 487                      |
| 2008  | 207                           | 33 743                       | 52                          | 22 390                    | 179                        | 41 666                      |
| 2009  | 80                            | 14 467                       | 14                          | 8 629                     | 47                         | 14 979                      |
| 2010  | 47                            | 8 117                        | 9                           | 3 790                     | 26                         | 5 828                       |
| 2011  | 30                            | 6 079                        | 14                          | 3 036                     | 30                         | 5 325                       |
| 2012  | 14                            | 3 790                        | 1                           | 333                       | 13                         | 3 678                       |
| 2013  | 2                             | 445                          | 7                           | 1 359                     | 7                          | 1 397                       |
| 2014  | 2                             | 407                          | 8                           | 2 061                     | 4                          | 1 124                       |
| 2015  | 6                             | 1 344                        | 9                           | 2 096                     | 6                          | 1 786                       |
| 2016  | 9                             | 1 654                        | 3                           | 910                       | 2                          | 900                         |
| 2017  | 10                            | 1 664                        | 15                          | 1 280                     | 8                          | 1 414                       |
| 2018  | 17                            | 1 530                        | 10                          | 1 295                     | 18                         | 1 238                       |
| 2019  | 9                             | 1 587                        | 25                          | 2 791                     | 29                         | 3 345                       |
| Total | 8 187                         | 3 915 551                    | 10 519                      | 4 389 114                 |

Note: * marks parameters presented without taking into account the occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol and part of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhans regions.

Table 1: Summary data regarding rehabilitation measures on farms affected by BLV according to reports of regional laboratories and SSRILDVSE.
that the total number of cattle also decreased actively in the same years.

and implemented serological methods. However, it should be borne in mind

decreased (Fig. 4).

dies, removed from the herd animals and rehabilitated farms also de-

which indicates the effectiveness of the implemented measures to combat

Table 2

| Years | Number of investigated sera | Studies in AGID | Studies in ELISA |
|-------|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|       | total quantity | number of positive | total quantity | number of positive |
| 2008  | 5,945,105     | 5,923,858          | 44,863         | 2,765 |
| 2009  | 4,943,114     | 4,901,092          | 29,528         | 2,320 |
| 2010  | 4,598,570     | 4,594,568          | 24,249         | 1,182 |
| 2011  | 4,493,820     | 4,493,271          | 22,124         | 1,105 |
| 2012  | 4,369,989     | 4,358,421          | 26,714         | 2,946 |
| 2013  | 4,089,300     | 4,043,138          | 15,229         | 1,435 |
| 2014  | 3,894,753     | 3,884,818          | 13,609         | 596  |
| 2015* | 3,614,176     | 3,607,529          | 9,067          | 549  |
| 2016* | 2,895,153     | 2,888,010          | 8,094          | 211  |
| 2017* | 2,997,292     | 2,991,129          | 8,139          | 370  |
| 2018* | 2,897,776     | 2,818,742          | 46,667         | 622  |
| 2019* | 2,720,703     | 1,864,169          | 858,323        | 6,902 |
| Total | 47,373,951    | 46,369,591         | 1,106,606      | 21,003 |

Note: * – see Table 1.

In general, there is a positive trend compared to the early 2000s, which indicates the effectiveness of the implemented measures to combat bovine leukemia. However, one of the important factors in this is also that the total number of cattle, and cows in particular, is significantly declining every year. Thus, the number of cattle decreased from almost 22 million to 3 million, while the number of cows also decreased by 4 times (Fig. 3).

Simultaneously with these indicators, the number of serological studies, removed from the herd animals and rehabilitated farms also decreased (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Dynamics of number of cattle and cows by years according to reports of regional laboratories and SSRLDVSE

Fig. 4. Dynamics of total number of cattle, studied sera samples and number of infected cattle by years (for convenience in the trends comparison, the quantity of livestock per million head and studied samples divided by a conventional 100 units) according to reports of regional laboratories and SSRLDVSE

All of this certainly indicates the effectiveness of preventive measures and implemented serological methods. However, it should be borne in mind that the total number of cattle also decreased actively in the same years.

Discussion

The first cases of bovine leukemia in Ukraine were registered and described in Kharkiv region (Eastern Ukraine) in 1953 (Stegniy et al., 2013). Later, there were reports of the disease among cows in the western and central regions of our country.

In the second half of the 1980s in Ukraine, according to investigation of Mandygra (2016), there was an extremely difficult epizootic situation with enzootic bovine leukemia. Thus, during a serological study of 5 133 samples from breeding bulls of 126 state breeding stations, 12.7% of infected animals by BLV were detected. In particular, the infection rate of animals from Zaporizhzhya station was 50.0%, Donetsk – 36.5%, Kyiv – 19.3%, Karlivohrad – 16.3%, Vohov – 17.7%, Kherson – 16.5%, Odessa – 16.0%, Ternopil – 15.5%. In the same period, 16.9% of cows that were kept on 139 state breeding stations could not be used for reproduction because of seropositivity to leukemia. The disease began to be registered in the cows from the southern regions of country (41.1% of infected animals from breeding stations in Mykolaiv region) (Dombrovskyi et al., 2003).

The investigation of Dombrovskyi et al. (2003) shows that the epizootic situation of leukemia in Ukraine during 1980–1987 was characterized by large-scale and uneven spreading. It was registered throughout the territory of the country. The incidence of infection (per 100 thousand studied animals) during the analyzed period was relatively stable and amounted to 131.7–247.0 sick cattle. The indicators of intensity and extensiveness of the epizootic process also hark high rates: the rate of foci was 0.1, the coefficient of affection – 1.0, the incidence rate – 0.014 (Dombrovskyi et al., 2003).

The epizootic situation began to change after the implementation into veterinary practice of AGID with specific leukemia antigen in 1986. Thus, the rate of infection of cattle in Ukraine was highest in 1986 and amounted to 18.4%. Large-scale diagnostic studies using AGID helped to reduce this indicator to 6.4% in 1994. It increased slightly between 1995 and 1997 but, in 1998, this rate was 6.2%. Thus for 13 years, the rate of infection decreased by almost three times (Mandygra et al., 2016).

As the results of our research have shown, AGID remains the actual and effective method of leukosis diagnosis, despite the implementation into veterinary practice of ELISA and PCR in 2007. During 2008–2019, more than 46 million blood serum samples were tested by this reaction, which is 97.9% of the total number of investigated samples.

At the same time, just over 1 million samples were tested by ELISA (2.3% of total number of investigated specimens). This is due to the fact that ELISA test-systems are more expensive than reagents for AGID, and using them requires special equipment (washer, thermoshaker, reader). Therefore, ELISA was used in most cases only as an additional or arbitration method, when cattle owners expressed a desire to conduct repeated studies. However, taking into account prospects, the State Service of Ukraine on Food Safety and Consumer Protection has begun to actively purchase ELISA test-systems for regional laboratories of Ukraine in 2019 and this trend will continue.

The results of our work indicate that since the 2000s, and especially since 2008, the number of cattle infected by enzootic bovine leukemia and
Thus, from 2008 to 2019 inclusive, the values of these indicators were less
derable attention to serological diagnostic methods (AGID, ELISA).

of intensity and extensiveness of the epizootic process have been
infected animals, mostly in the private households. The obtained indica-
was closest to full recovery from enzootic bovine leukosis in 2013–2014,
To increase the effectiveness of the studies, because PCR can detect infected
calves younger than 6 months of age, despite the potential presence of
cases of samples from particularly valuable breeding cattle. However, the
Ukraine. Laboratory staff use this reaction only for investigation in the rare
carrier samples (in Ukrainian).

A retrospective analysis of the epizootic situation regarding enzootic
bovine leukemia in Ukraine showed that it was extremely severe in 1994.
This year, there were 2 346 farms affected by BLV and 474 596 sick
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