



Volume 17 Issue 1

# Smithton Veterinary Service April '06 Newsletter

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## Staff changes

By now you may have noticed a couple of faces missing and a couple of new faces at SVS. Late in February we farewelled Georgina, Mary and Courtney. Georgina had been with us for 3 years and like all before her, decided it was time to go overseas. She has headed to the UK indefinitely via some windsurfing in Bali and trekking in Nepal. Courtney saw an opportunity to work in the family real estate business as too good to refuse and will be involved in rentals. Mary has taken up a position at CHAC and hopes to undertake studies in disabilities. All will be missed and we wish them well in their new directions.

Our new vet on the team is Lauren Stevenson. Lauren is a Melbourne graduate with a passion for cattle work and an interest in riding horses. She has been on a couple of rides recently and is looking forward to bringing her two horses over to Circular Head at Easter. A local hockey team has already recruited her skills for the season.

Norma Bishop has replaced Courtney in the office. Norma came to Circular Head in 1992 from Darwin and now lives at Forest. Norma is heavily committed to supporting her children's schools through the P&F. Hannah Stewart has also joined our team as a Veterinary nurse. Hannah will be responsible for looking after your pets when staying with us.

It is a steep learning curve for anyone coming into the business so please be gentle and patient with our new recruits!

### **My herd's fertility**

Dairy Australia is about to roll out the next stage of InCalf for dairy farmers in Tasmania. The InCalf project team have spent several years developing the project that started with a detailed study of the fertility of the Australian Dairy herd. Since then they have released the InCalf Book and the InCalf Tools to assist dairy farmers in making changes leading to incremental improvements in the fertility of their herd. The next stage of the process is a series of workshops aimed at giving farmers the tools and information necessary to make informed choices about fertility on their farms. The first part of this process is a free session introducing the resources and tools in the InCalf learning package. Other key elements in the session include an examination of each farmer's reproductive results and an explanation of how Farm Focus Reports and the InCalf tools fit into a process which can be used to achieve sustained change.

**Smithton Veterinary Service will host my Herd's Fertility in Smithton in April. The 90-minute session is free to attend but will be strictly by invitation only. For more details phone 6452-1054.**

## **Calf Weights**

*Have you wondered how your heifers compare with others in the district or if they are achieving the required growth rate for their age?*

By weighing your heifers regularly **and** processing the data these questions can be accurately answered. Weighing heifers is a simple and easy procedure but unfortunately many people simply weigh their animals and don't do anything with the data or don't weigh them at all. Weighing can be done when other tasks such as vaccinating or drenching occur. All it takes is some forward planning. Electronic scales can be hired from us if you do not have access to weighing equipment.

For a limited time we will process weigh data FREE OF CHARGE and report on how your heifers are going, provided the information is supplied electronically. Many different electronic formats are suitable.

If you are interested in getting your calf weights processed please contact us for more details.

### **Pig Survey**

We have been asked by the DPIWE to conduct a survey of young pigs in Circular Head. Like the Mad Cow Disease surveillance work we do with cattle, the government needs to be able to show overseas countries we do not have a particular disease. This new exotic disease in pigs is known as Post Weaning Multisystemic Wasting Syndrome and is becoming widespread overseas. To date it has not been seen in Australia. It affects pigs 4-12 weeks old and involves wasting with a very high mortality rate. The survey will allow us to know where pigs are situated, whether there are any particular disease issues and also give us an opportunity to remind farmers not to swill feed. Remember that the foot and mouth outbreak in England recently was caused by feeding restaurant scraps to pigs!. By knowing who has pigs and where they are located, the government can also notify producers of any relevant pig issues if necessary. If you have any pigs and we have not already contacted you we would be grateful if you could contact us at your earliest convenience. The questions take about 5 minutes and all information is treated confidentially by the DPIWE as per the Privacy Act.

### **Pregnancy Rates in Circular Head this year**

This season clearly demonstrated that heifers failing to reach target weight had very poor pregnancy rates. Pregnancy rates of only 40% - 50% for an 8-week mating were seen in below target weight heifers compared with 70% - 80% plus in heifers achieving target weight.

Ideally join heifers 10-14 days before mating the cows and only mate the heifers for 8 weeks total. If they are well grown, the in calf % should be 85%+ and more importantly none will be late in the calving period. Inductions don't even need thinking about and having calved early they are less likely to be late as 3 year olds. Don't be fooled by mating heifers for longer periods – the only heifers that fail to get in calf early are those that need more time to grow.

Six week in-calf-rates ranged from the 50%'s to the low 80%'s. You need to seek help if your 6-week in-calf-rate is less than 60%. Many herds measured 8 week in calf rates due to the timing of the pregnancy test. 8 week rates ranged from low 60%'s to mid 80%'s.

Whilst some of these rates are not record breaking they serve to demonstrate that pregnancy rates to AI are often not as high as expected. Unless this is allowed for, follow up bull power is often lacking in these herds. Results in several herds clearly demonstrated insufficient bulls were used after AI finished. Shorter mating periods, whilst reducing the number of cows needing to be induced will result initially in lower in-calf-rates with more empties. Don't be caught - More bulls are needed to compensate for this.

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### **Storing and Using Medicines On Farm**

All drugs and medicines have label advice on appropriate use, storage and disposal (eg store below 25°C, protect from light). If medicines are not stored appropriately the label expiry date will be irrelevant and, in fact, using the product may cause harm.

You have a responsibility to store medicines securely and use them as per label directions. For instance, if you have a left-over antibiotic which had been prescribed by a vet for a cow with mastitis, it is not appropriate to use the left over drug on a sick calf, bull, pig or dog. It would be advisable in this instance to discuss the animal's symptoms with a vet first – we are only a phone call away.

It is important to remember that some products like vaccines require refrigeration. All prescription drugs should be stored securely where the public cannot readily access them. On top of the milk vat or on the floor of the calf shed is not OK. On large farms with many staff only a few appropriately trained people should be responsible for drugs and medicines. It is mandatory that you maintain a register of all veterinary medicines and chemicals. In a recent mainland instance a farm worker committed suicide by injecting herself with prostaglandin and an antibiotic which she readily had access to - another good reason why our practice does not leave prostaglandin on farm for farmers to administer. Other important reasons why medicines should be stored and used appropriately include drug residues and maintenance of sterility of the product. Contaminated meat or milk can get you in trouble from the authorities, and contaminated medicines can lead to dead stock. So when you next purchase these products read label directions and if not clear, ask.

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### **Management Plans for Dairy Herds in Circular Head**

Smithton Veterinary Service has written an easy-to-read, 40 page reference manual with the above title. It has been developed using our local knowledge and recognised dairy industry information to enhance the animal health, welfare and production of Circular Head dairy cattle. We believe it contains excellent reference material and answers many questions which farmers frequently ask us. The main sections are:

- Calf rearing
- Heifer rearing
- Lameness
- Mastitis
- Reproduction
- Trace elements
- Parasite control & vaccination
- Nutrition
- Approach to general animal diseases

**For those interested, copies are available for \$20 each (ex GST) or you can view a copy at the clinic before buying.**

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## Perennial Ryegrass Toxicosis (Staggers)

Perennial ryegrass toxicosis or 'Ryegrass Staggers' is a continuing problem in Southern Australia and seems to be on the increase. A workshop was held in Melbourne last year to discuss the implications for Australian livestock and ways to prevent or decrease the effects of staggers.

As most people will be aware, a fungus (or endophyte) in the ryegrass produces the toxins that causes the disease syndrome. One of the main points that came out of the meeting was the wide-ranging effects that the fungal toxins have on the animal besides the obvious one of 'the staggers'. *Decreased milk production of between 10-20% , scouring, weight loss, selective appetite, lameness and heat stress* are well documented. Other less researched areas include immune system problems, effects on somatic cell counts and fertility issues. So as you can see the 'staggers' cows/calves we see may only be the tip of the iceberg in terms of the disease syndrome.

Work that has been carried out to try and improve the problem was also discussed at the forum. Pasture management is one of the solutions put forward, and recommendations include:

- offering animals pasture with high leaf levels and low amounts of stem and dead material.
- avoiding the need for animals to graze at the base of pastures.
- decreasing stocking rates so animals are not forced to eat as low.

These techniques though are difficult to carry out through dry summers/autumns when pasture growth rates are low.

A lot of research and development has been carried out with respect to the endophytes to select for strains that will benefit pastures but are not as toxic to animals. There are some strains commercially available that are showing good results. This procedure though is costly in replacing pastures and good hygiene is required to stop contamination from old pastures.

There is also work being carried out on the use of additives e.g. sodium bentonite to mop/soak up the toxins. The results of these have been inconclusive. The use of alternative feeds e.g. hay, silage or pellets have been found to be effective in decreasing the toxin load on the animals by substitution.

There is no easy answer to the staggers issue although a lot of research and trials are being carried out. Perennial ryegrass toxicosis has been made a research priority in southern Australia with the formation of a working group to coordinate and push research into the problem. Hopefully new information and techniques to deal with this problem will become available.