

CALVING PROBLEMS IN BEEF COWS

With the onset of winter we are approaching the peak calving season in Glen Innes and the surrounding districts. This article is a brief recap on the causes of dystocia (trouble calving), stages of calving and common problems. There are three common causes of dystocia. The most common cause is foeto-pelvic disproportion ie the foetus grows too big for the heifer's/cow's pelvis or the heifer's/cow's pelvis is too small for the foetus. The next most common cause is malposition of the calf, ie, the calf is coming backwards or incorrect presentation of the limbs or head. Lastly heifers more than cows may have ineffective labour. Causes for the above may be due to genetics, nutrition, age of heifer at conception, number of calves had by the heifer/cow and diseases such as Akabane. Calving problems are generally caused by a combination of these factors.

The calving process is divided into three distinct stages although these stages may overlap and uncomplicated calvings will be observed as a continuous process. During the first stage of calving, the foetus, with the assistance of uterine contractions, actively positions itself for delivery through the mother's pelvis. Stage two starts with the rupture of the bag of fluid surrounding the foetus followed by strong uterine contractions to expel the foetus. This stage generally lasts between 30 minutes to 4 hours. If the calf has not been delivered within this time and becomes distressed, it may pass its meconium (foetal faeces) which usually causes the foetal fluids to be yellowish or brownish in colour. The calf rapidly becomes non-viable once distressed and may asphyxiate if the placenta separates from the uterus. The ideal time to intervene and assist the cow is before this happens. As a general rule cows need to be examined if a calf has not been delivered within 4 hours of her showing initial signs of calving such as restlessness, contractions or breaking of the bag surrounding the calf. Veterinary intervention may involve vaginal delivery of the calf with traction or a caesarean section.

Stage three of calving follows delivery of the calf and uterine contractions continue to help expel the placenta and membranes generally within 6 to 24 hours after calving. Uterine contractions subside quickly after 24 hours post calving and after 48 hours uterine contractions have all but finished completely. These stage three contractions are essential for passage of the placenta and

membranes. Retention of the placenta and membranes may result in infection of the uterus and impaired fertility at future breeding. Intervention to remove them may be advised and your vet can be consulted regarding this.

Paralysis, hindlimb inco-ordination and hindlimb weakness following calving can sometimes result from crushing of the obturator nerve by the calf's passage through the pelvic canal. Rest, anti-inflammatories, lifting of the cow and general nursing of the recumbent animal will help alleviate swelling. The length of time that animal can be down is highly variable and can range from several hours to weeks to failure of the animal to ever stand again.