



Pregnancy testing has continued in recent weeks, with variable results ranging from 7% to 30% not-in-calf rates.

We welcome Dr Stu Griffin to our staff for a period of locum work while Bridie and Julia have holidays. Dr Jules de Bruyn and Stu will be heading to Alice Springs later in April for the annual *Australian Cattle Vets'* conference.

This month's newsletter focuses on a dramatic case of oleander poisoning in a group of heifers, and takes a brief look at other causes of sudden death in cattle.

A CASE OF OLEANDER POISONING

One of our vets recently visited a property where four heifers were found dead overnight, with a fifth dying the next day. It was discovered that garden prunings heaped into the heifers' paddock three days previously contained oleander branches.

Although commonly found in gardens around Australia (including kindergartens and parks!), oleander is highly toxic and potentially fatal when consumed by people, pets and livestock. The toxic component is found in all parts of the plant. A single leaf or flower is enough to kill a child. Anecdotes tell of people poisoned after using stems to stir coffee or roast meat.

Fresh oleander is relatively unpalatable, so most cases of toxicity occur when stock have access to partially-dried cuttings. As little as 10 grams can kill cattle. Signs of intoxication vary, but can include salivation, trembling, bloody diarrhoea, convulsions and irregular, difficult breathing.



CAUSES OF SUDDEN DEATH

Outbreaks of sudden death in cattle can have devastating effects and reaching a rapid diagnosis is critical. Being aware of possible causes can help you to identify risk factors and take initial steps (such as moving cattle to another paddock) to reduce further deaths.

- **Nitrite poisoning**

"Nitrates" are commonly found in cereal crops, sorghum and turnips. These plants are most toxic in hot, humid weather when growth is rapid. Nitrate forms a more toxic substance ("nitrite") inside the rumen. This reduces the ability of red blood cells to carry oxygen around the body. Cattle show difficulty breathing and usually die within an hour. A characteristic sign of nitrite poisoning is muddy brown gums.

- **Clostridial diseases**

Enterotoxaemia, blackleg and tetanus are among the many diseases caused by bacteria in the *Clostridium* family. These highly-resistant bacteria survive for long periods in the environment. All animals should be vaccinated against the five common clostridial diseases.

Vaccinate calves from 6 weeks of age, with a booster 4-6 weeks after the initial dose. A second booster 12 months later should provide lifelong protection against tetanus and blackleg. Protection against enterotoxaemia lasts for three months. Boosters should be given before a change in diet (eg. starting grain feeding).

- **Lead poisoning**

This is quite common in Australia. Sources of lead include old batteries and lead paint. The "sudden death" form of disease usually affects calves, but can also be seen in adult cattle. Signs include tremors, staggering, frothy saliva, convulsions and blindness.

- **Blue-green algae poisoning**

"Blooms" of blue-green algae occur in warm, still water conditions with adequate nutrients (eg. irrigation run-off carrying faeces and fertiliser into dams). Animals may show weakness, lethargy and diarrhoea. In serious cases, death follows muscle tremors and coma.