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Pain Relief in Cattle

Because of evolutionary pressure cows do not readily show pain. Back when cows were hunted by predators any sign of weakness or injury would make them more vulnerable.

Our understanding of the effect of pain in cows has progressed greatly over the last 10 years. A recent study compared lame cows that were either treated with an anti-inflammatory for 3 days or not treated.

The level of pain was assessed by squeezing the hoof with foot testers and measuring the reaction. As you would expect the level of pain was significantly reduced while the cow was being treated with an anti-inflammatory.

The interesting thing was that the level of pain was still much lower in the treated cows 30 days later. It seems that if the initial level of pain is high then the nerve pathways “remember” that pain for a long time afterwards - the sore foot was sensitised to feel more pain. So, while the anti-inflammatory was well and truly out of the system the effect was quite long lasting.

Vets in our practice have moved towards using more pain relief in procedures such as eye removals, caesareans and difficult calvings.

Anti-inflammatory treatments such as Ketoprofen are widely used to help cows with calving paralysis and down cows. This is particularly the case since Ketoprofen was registered with nil milk withhold.

It is our opinion that cows that have had difficult calvings and some lame cows will benefit from being given pain relief. It is likely that if a cow is in less pain immediately after calving, then she will be more likely to maintain her appetite.

A cow that is eating will be much less likely to develop secondary problems such as acetonemia and displaced stomachs. It will also increase her chance of producing well throughout the whole lactation and of getting back in calf.

A reasonable definition of a difficult calving would include any calving where a calving jack is required or where a calf is born dead because of a difficult birth or where there is damage to the soft tissue of the cow.