Dealing with abortion in cattle early

ASK THE EXPERT

Compiled by Christine Katende

Send your questions to features@ug.nationmedia.com

Dear Dr Samuel

I want to know more about abortion and its causes? Ritah Namisango.

Dear Ritah

In animal husbandry, we define abortion as the production of one or more calves between 50 and 270 days of gestation; with calves being born dead or surviving for less than 24 hours.

On a practical basis most abortions occurring during the second and third month go undetected until the cow fails to calve or returns to heat, so abortion rates are usually calculated from cattle that abort from 120 days onwards.

Most herds have an abortion rate of around one to two per cent, so a single abortion is no cause for alarm.

An annual abortion rate of over five percent is considered to be the point at which intervention should take place.

Often, however, intervention is based on a group of cows aborting at the same time rather than the annual abortion rate, which may not be higher than five per cent.

This more proactive strategy is particularly useful in seasonally calving herds.

Causes of abortion?

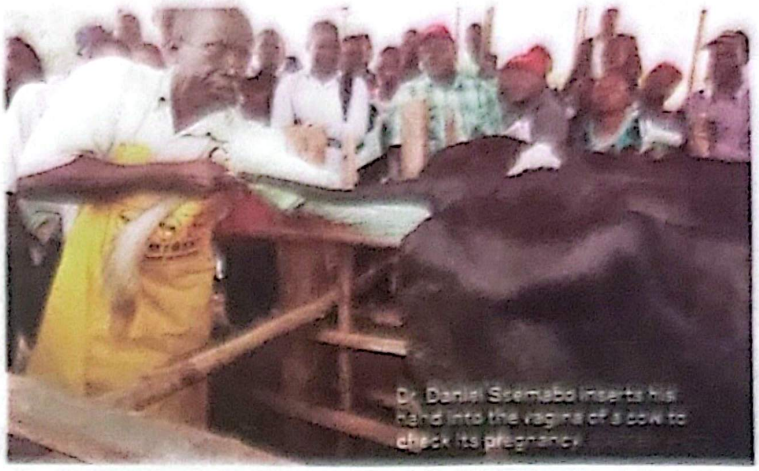
Abortion can be divided into non-infectious causes and infectious causes. Generally, it is the infectious causes which are more important as they are more likely to be involved in abortion storms and because we have specific control measures for many of them.

However, non-infectious causes can be responsible for outbreaks of abortion so identification of whether abortion is due to non-infectious or infectious abortion is a critical part of any abortion investigation.

A wide variety of infectious agents have been associated with abortion in cattle, ranging from diseases which cause abortion secondary to systemic infection to ones which specifically target the reproductive tract and cause abortion without any clinical signs.

Any disease which results in a sick cow and a high fever can cause abortion, so valuable information on the cause of abortion can be identified if information is available on the cow's health before it aborted and, if there were clinical signs, whether there were similar signs in cows which did not abort.

Abortion without clinical signs is a common sequel to many of the infections that cause abortion including many of the most important causes such as brucellosis, BVD, leptospirosis, Salmonella Dublin and Bacillus licheniformis.



Dr Daniel Ssemaba inserts his hand into the vagina of a cow to check its pregnancy

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Pay special attention to the health status of bulls. Purchased bulls can introduce disease and spread it venereally. Get your veterinarian to assess the health status of your bulls. Only purchase bulls from farms with a proven high health status.

Preventing abortion

The basis of all abortion prevention programmes is sound herd health management. The following can help you prevent abortion:

- Minimise the risk of introducing diseases onto the farm. If disease can't enter the herd it can spread within the herd.
- Either effectively quarantine purchased cattle for a minimum of 14 days or maintain a completely 'closed' herd.
- Pay special attention to the health status of bulls. Purchased bulls can introduce disease and spread it venereally. Get your veterinarian to assess the health status of your bulls. Only purchase bulls from farms with a proven high health status.
- Ensure farm visitors and their equipment are clean before they enter the farm. Use disinfection if necessary.
- Make sure your boundaries are stockproof. Cattle which jump fences often bring disease with them.
- Isolating aborting cows and immediate removal of aborted materials can reduce spread within the herd.

— Answered by Dr Samuel Nsubuga, a veterinarian

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