**What the textbooks don’t tell you about...**

**Gastric torsion in sows**

Very few textbooks – only two that I know of – mention this disorder, and then only briefly. Sure, it is not all that common, but during the recent hot summer in Europe quite a few cases seem to have occurred. This made me look into the subject and consult one or two pig veterinarians – why it should have flared up during hot weather I discuss later.

Some sows – the bigger ones on this farm – started to be found dead in the mornings. The farmer put it down to heat stress, but during the recent hot spell. However, the reduction in evening temperature, feeding-wise, is likely to tear about.

**Greed**

So what about these sows which fall prey to the disorder? Greed, to sum it up. It does seem that the most important factor related to gastric torsion in sows is the rapid eating of relatively large amounts of food by excited and/or anxious animals. The vulnerable and nearby spleen may also rupture with severe bleeding.

**‘Twisted Gut?’**

Is it the same condition? My experience suggests it may not be, although gastric torsion of the stomach may aggravate the disorder. For many years I have been associated with feeding milk by-products where twisted gut in growing pigs rather than sows is quite common and is often due to their having a full belly of food – like whey – getting excited, rushing about and so causing a sudden physical movement to twist a section of the intestine around. This completely blocks the digestive process. Turning corners too sharply, jumping over a pen mate or coming to a sudden or awkward stop; much more common than gut torsion in sows.

This physical cause, rather than gas distension can happen in sows too, but much less commonly than in the younger, more agile and excitable grower than in the sow or grown gilt.

**A checklist**

* If the condition is currently a problem, introduce twice a day feeding. This is not to say that once a day feeding of dry sows in particular is bad in itself but it may be a contributory cause if the problem is apparent.

* Do not stir up the sows unnecessarily at feeding time. They’ll be excited through anticipation anyway, so think about ways of feeding them quietly without fuss and if possible, together over as short a time as can be managed. Automatic dispensing systems, I find, are pretty effective. I only know of one ‘outbreak’ of gastric torsion in dry sows fed automatically but this was due to the overuse of whey so as to keep pace with summer deliveries. The whey was very fresh and warm as a result and wheyfeeders generally know about the perils of warm whey!

* Any animal which is known to be excitable should be fed first. Know your sows!

* Obviously foods which are likely to cause undue carbohydrate fermentation in the large or small intestine should be avoided. However, this is not an easy area as it is the combination of some foods rather than the dominance of just one of them which can cause sudden gas production. Sugary or high-starch foods are at risk so a good variety of ingredients rather than too much of any one of them is a good thing to bear in mind.

* Similarly, too many fermentative bacteria in the gut could be a hazard in this area; brewer’s yeast or by-products like DDS and waste beer might occasionally be implicated. Normally these are excellent foods fed correctly and I in no way denigrate them. But if gastric torsion starts to appear then reducing or even withdrawing them has sorted the problem. Adding penicillin at 100 grammes per tonne or a broad spectrum antibiotic (Muirhead, 1997) could reduce the bacterial overload.

* To return to the physical aspects of the condition, those sows which jump up at the feeding passage rail at feeding (caused by boar presence, straying down, watering in hot weather) can sometimes cause distortion. Sure, jobs like these have got to be done, but if distortion is about on the farm, then don’t attempt them on sows with an overfull stomach please – leave it for a while.

**Hot summer**

So why have we seen more cases after this hot summer? Bit of a puzzle, really, as heat makes animals soporific – much less likely to tear about.

I’ve noticed that due to the heat, sows and boars have been fed in the cool of the evening inside or out, which is a logical and sensible thing to do. (And on some outdoor farms in my neck of the woods here they were watered by bowser in the evening, too. Not a good idea as water should be continually be available, especially during a hot spell).

However, the reduction in evening temperature, feeding-wise, caused both hunger and mobility to become excessive for a while as they just didn’t feel like eating in the heat of the day, so fairly galloped up to the feed wagon with much jostling when it arrived in the field nearer to sunset.

Some sows – the bigger ones on this farm – started to be found dead in the mornings. The farmer put it down to heat stress, but post-mortems revealed gastric torsion as the cause of death. The feeding and watering regime was altered to a ‘little and (more) often’ basis and the problem disappeared. **PP**