

Performance breeding seminar

Anne Brown reports on the latest equine research
Photographs by Anne Brown

Both vets and breeders benefited from the Equine Reproduction Seminar at the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester, in March.

Sponsors West Kington Stud, the Beaufort Embryo Transfer Centre, B&W Vets and Saracen Horse Feeds organised an intensive daytime session for vets and research scientists, and a practical evening session for breeders.

World expert Tom Stout came over from the Utrecht Faculty of Veterinary Science in the Netherlands and gave three separate lectures. He spoke very eloquently on Reproductive Pharmacology and the Veterinary Management of Competition Horses, as well as Overcoming Infertility in Mares. The other experts bringing vets up to speed on the latest developments were Sarah Stoneham, a specialist in neonatal gastro-intestinal disease; James Crabtree who explained the advances in Doppler ultrasound in mares; and Newmarket veteran Nick Wingfield Digby, who covered growth defects in foals.

Research seems to show that small herd size and small paddock size is best for young foals, enabling them enough - but not too much - exercise. And thankfully, the vets advised giving foals time to self-correct imbalances in the legs or feet, before intervening unnecessarily.

To breed early foals, light was stressed as vital for mares to produce the hormones needed to ovulate early in the year, with stable lamps recommended so mares have no more than eight hours of darkness. Encouragingly, the vets were optimistic about the chances of most healthy mares to produce healthy foals. However, infertility and complications increase as mares get older, due often to the presence of cysts in the womb which prevent implantation of the fertilized egg. These can be burnt off but it is an expensive and not always accurate procedure.

Results from artificial insemination (AI) continue to improve, both from fresh or chilled semen and from frozen semen,



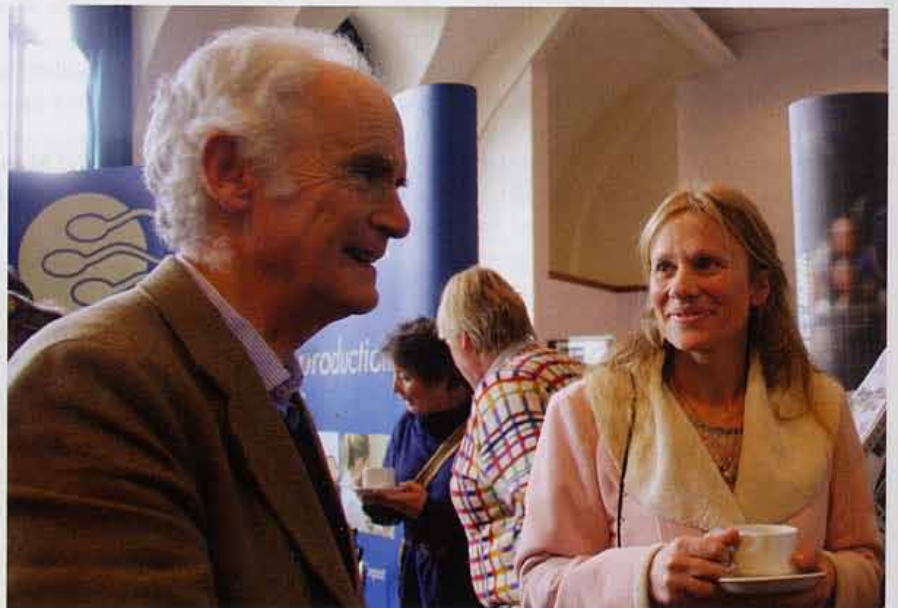
AHS President Anne Brown with vets Tom Stout and Emma Tomlinson

with embryo transfer an increasingly-used option for sport horse mares in their prime whose owners do not want to take them out of competition for maternal duties.

The real life-saving revelation was a product which induces lactation in any

mare, called domperidone! This could end the heartache of losing a foal because their dam dies or refuses to allow them to suckle, as long as another mare is available to take over as substitute mother.

While the mare will not produce the vital colostrum which every foal needs at birth



Finn Guinness chats with vet Lisa Adshead



Brightwells auctioneer Richard Botterill with Jan Rogers of the BEF and Chair of the Breeding seminar at the Royal Agricultural University

to give it protection against infection, she will produce milk if a foal suckles. The vet gives compound for six or seven days to a mare (preferably non-maiden), plus a quadruple dose of prostaglandin which can be pretty gruesome for the mare as she simulates birth pains and can sweat up dramatically.

Welsh equine specialist vet Lisa Adshead, a former Marathon winner on her Arab gelding Shakmari Gold, had every reason to be grateful to the drug almost immediately after she attended the symposium.

"We used it on a maiden mare to save an orphan foal and it worked a treat," she confirmed.

The other surprise was Sarah Stoneham's identification of gastric problems in foals under two weeks old, which need a completely different treatment to that for older foals.

We've all seen foals scouring when their dams have their foal heat – Sarah was talking about diarrhoea ten times worse than this, where the foals lose so much fluid it is in danger of organ damage and protein leakage. Intra-venous drugs and antibiotics, even an enema as soon as possible, are Sarah's most frequent solutions, and separation from mare's milk in some cases. However, care must be taken with electrolytes as new-borns don't handle them in the way older foals

do. The traditional Pepto Bismol is often not the adequate answer for very young foals.

Debbie Nash, the instigator of these excellent symposia, explained her most recent work on MIE (mating-induced endometritis). This is often caused by bacterial contamination, or the stallion's sperm, and creates an influx of fluid which can prevent the implantation of the egg.

The evening session was chaired by Jan Rogers, Head of Equine Development at the British Equestrian Federation (BEF) who went on to London the next day to speak at the National Equine Forum. The first speaker, Jo Dixon, a Futurity Evaluator with the BEF, opened with wise words: "A functioning uterus does not equal a good brood mare."

Jo then explained the value of putting youngsters, from foals to 3-year olds, through the BEF Grading system.

"It is a quality assurance of equine athletes," she explained, "and provides information for breeders who consider using particular stallions."

The highest Grade – Elite – is achieved by only 7% of young horses forward, but a Higher First or First Premium should be attainable for those correctly presented at one of the Grading Centres around the country each summer. The vetting counts for 29% of the marks and

the movement and judges' assessment 71%. Temperament is not taken into account and the judges no longer know the pedigree of the youngsters in front of them. Vitaly, Jo confirmed that in the Endurance section – unlike the Eventing, Dressage and Show jumping sections – sires do not need to be Graded, which allows much more flexibility for breeding our long distance Arab athletes.

Lizzie Drury, from Saracen Feeds, outlined the work the company has been doing with Kentucky Equine Research in the USA. They concentrate on the high energy and high protein mixes containing amino acids needed by weanlings and growing youngsters. She advises starting specialised rations before foals are weaned to help them through this stressful time. "They need 1% to 1.5% of their body weight of feed every day," explained Lizzie. She recommends high energy forage with oats, cereal, super fibres, beet pulp, soya oil and rice bran.

"If they get pot-bellied, reduce the forage and increase the concentrates," she advises. "Foals should not carry fat – you should be able to see their rib-cage."

While Richard Botterill, an auctioneer with Brightwells, had sound advice on marketing young horses, it was out of the league of most of us. The company handles sales in the tens of thousand per horse – it can cost £1,500 just to put one Warmblood performance horse through an auction. They require them to be trained, athletic and fit.

"If the horse is ridden, it's better to have a professional in the saddle for the best price," advises Richard.

Thankfully, he offered alternatives, including using all the latest social networking opportunities, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as a smart, up-to-date, informative website of your own.

"Group together for cost-effective advertising; approach potential buyers at events and competitions, and be prepared to sell second-rate horses at a loss," he suggests.

As most horses are sold to amateurs, he believes that temperament, soundness and quality are the traits buyers are looking for, and while there has been a huge down-turn in the number of horses bred in recent years, this can work in the favour of breeders still producing quality stock. ☺