

Bleeding ulcers due to reduced forage

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First thing Saturday morning, I got a call to see a young cow that had difficulty breathing and was frothing at the mouth.

On the way out to the farm I had the usual internal debate, ruminating on possible causes of increased salivation and wondering if the car had all the treatments in stock.

Happy enough that I had enough remedies to cover everything from choke to timber tongue, I hopped out of the car only for my stomach to immediately sink. This looked like a cow living on borrowed time.

A far more serious scenario than the average oral or throat problem, the cow had lost her appetite recently and it showed in rapid loss of condition, coupled with almost total loss of milk. However, it was the distressed laboured breathing that made me pessimistic.

The farmer was away on a short holiday, but his brother, a priest, was on hand to help.

How apt, I quietly thought, as divine intervention was definitely needed.

Clinical examination of the animal showed no oral infection, but her gums and inner eye lids were almost white,

instead of the usual healthy salmon pink. The gasping breath was not caused by an obstruction as I originally thought, but from her being anaemic. She had lost a lot of blood from an abomasal ulcer and did not have enough red blood cells to transport the oxygen around the body. The herd was understandably on a high amount of concentrates due to milk production needs and lack of grass this summer. However, a reduced amount of forage means the abomasum empties quicker, allowing the stomach acids to linger in an empty stomach, causing ero-

sion of the inner lining and underlying blood vessels.

Abomasal ulcers can vary in severity from showing no signs to peritonitis and/or fatal blood loss. Those cows with severe blood loss will need a blood transfusion. Those with less severe signs will often have a reduced appetite, so the animal may be treated for ketosis too, which should help her start grazing again, which is very important. Oral stomach protectants can be used.

From a herd perspective, the treatment is to increase roughage and decrease concentrates, which is difficult during the

current fodder crisis. Black dung is often seen from digestion of blood, but not always, as in this patient, who made a steady recovery. If you have any questions about abomasal ulcers, please contact your vet.

Denis Sweeney works at Comeragh Veterinary Kilmacthomas, Co Waterford. Comeragh Veterinary is part of XLVets. XLVets is a group of progressive practices who are working together to achieve a better future for agriculture and veterinary in Ireland. For further information, go to www.xlvets.ie.