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INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE CONTROL OF NEOSPOROSIS IN CATTLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
Veterinary Clinical Sciences

Massey University, Palmerston North
New Zealand

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“It is a riddle, 
wrapped in a mystery, 
inside an enigma; 
but perhaps there is a key.”

Winston Churchill
October, 1939
General Abstract

The research presented in this thesis was undertaken to further understanding of the control of neosporosis in cattle. A prospective cohort study of primiparous heifers on a farm with a history of *Neospora*-associated abortion found a 0.65 risk of abortion among seropositive heifers, suggesting that identification and culling of seropositive heifer replacements may be cost-effective.

A clinical trial of a registered *Neospora caninum* vaccine utilising 2,246 cattle from five farms with endemic *N. caninum* infection was assessed for efficacy in preventing abortion and vertical transmission. Overall vaccine efficacy was 0.25 (p=0.12) and vaccination increased the risk of vertical transmission. Histopathological and serological results from 148 cases of abortion from this trial were compiled to establish aetiological diagnoses. Nine of 34 cases where the fetus was examined had histopathological evidence of *N. caninum* infection. Histopathology revealed dual infectious aetiologies in 2 cases and serology suggested that, in another 17 cases, there had been recent exposure to a second infectious agent capable of causing abortion in conjunction with *N. caninum* lesions in the fetus or fetal bacteraemia.

As a prelude to cattle challenge trials, a challenge study conducted on pregnant sheep revealed a strong dose-response for abortion and that indirect fluorescent antibody test results did not correlate well with infection status or pregnancy outcome. A novel challenge method of applying tachyzoites to an abraded oral mucosa was undertaken in pregnant heifers to establish whether oral lesions could facilitate the direct horizontal transmission of *N. caninum* between cattle. One of eight heifers seroconverted, her calf and one other were seropositive when sampled within 12 hours of birth, and three other heifer-calf pairs had at least one positive polymerase chain reaction result at parturition. This method of transmission between cattle may be responsible for only a small proportion of infections but is a major new finding in the epidemiology of *N. caninum* infection and warrants further investigation.

Finally, inoculation with mouse-passaged *N. caninum* tachyzoites prior to mating did not prevent abortion when heifers were challenged again on Day 70 of gestation, suggesting that live inoculation may not be a suitable control option.
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Table of Contents

General Abstract ........................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................................... vii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................ ix
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ xiii
List of Tables .................................................................................................................................. xiv
Abbreviations .................................................................................................................................. xvii
Preface ........................................................................................................................................... xix
Chapter One ..................................................................................................................................... 1
  1.0 Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 3
Chapter Two  Literature Review ....................................................................................................... 7
  2.0 Literature Review ..................................................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Life cycle and basic biology of Neospora caninum ................................................................. 9
    2.1.1 Sporozoites ...................................................................................................................... 11
    2.1.2 Tachyzoites .................................................................................................................... 11
    2.1.3 Bradyzoites and tissue cysts ......................................................................................... 12
  2.2 Transmission of Neospora caninum to cattle ......................................................................... 13
    2.2.1 Horizontal transmission ............................................................................................... 13
    2.2.2 Vertical transmission .................................................................................................... 14
    2.2.3 Experimental methods of transmission ......................................................................... 15
  2.3 The clinical outcomes of Neospora caninum infection in cattle .............................................. 15
    2.3.1 Abortion ......................................................................................................................... 15
    2.3.2 Stillbirths and congenital abnormalities ......................................................................... 17
    2.3.3 Other production effects ............................................................................................... 17
  2.4 The immune response to Neospora caninum infection in cattle .............................................. 18
    2.4.1 Humoral immunity ........................................................................................................ 19
    2.4.2 Cell-mediated immunity ................................................................................................ 19
    2.4.3 The effect of pregnancy on the immune response to Neospora caninum ......................... 20
    2.4.4 The fetal response to Neospora caninum infection ......................................................... 21
  2.5 Diagnosis of neosporosis in cattle ........................................................................................... 22
    2.5.1 Serological techniques – indirect detection ...................................................................... 23
    2.5.2 Direct detection .............................................................................................................. 30
  2.6 Methods of control of neosporosis in cattle ............................................................................ 36
    2.6.1 General hygiene .............................................................................................................. 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Authors’ contributions to this study</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Materials and Methods</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Authors’ contributions to this study</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Material and methods</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>Authors’ contributions to this study</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Material and Methods</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 2.1  The life cycle of *Neospora caninum* ................................................................. 10

Figure 3.1  Survival curve for pregnancy in 164 rising 2-year-old heifers according to *Neospora caninum* serostatus ............................................................... 54

Figure 3.2  *Neospora caninum* indirect fluorescent antibody test (IFAT) titre around the time of abortion among 11 heifers seropositive by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. .................................................................................................................... 55

Figure 3.3  *Neospora caninum* indirect fluorescence antibody test (IFAT) titre in six heifers previously classified as seropositive by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay that did not abort. .................................................................................................................... 56

Figure 4.1  Change in *Neospora caninum* IFAT titre (number of dilutions) six weeks after the second treatment with Bovilis Neoguard ................................................................. 77

Figure 4.2  Relative risk of abortion with 95% confidence intervals for cows vaccinated with Bovilis Neoguard ........................................................................................................ 85

Figure 6.1  Comparison of serological results by A) IDEXX ELISA and B) IFAT at 28 days after intravenous inoculation with *N. caninum* tachyzoites. ........................................... 128

Figure 7.1  Serological response following challenge of pregnant heifers on Day 70 of gestation with *Neospora caninum* tachyzoites expressed as Sample/Positive (S/P) ratio using the HerdChek Neospora ELISA ................................................................. 152
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) sample/positive (S/P) ratios, used to determine the serological status for *Neospora caninum* of all heifers that had at least one positive ELISA result from a cohort of 164 pregnant Friesian-cross heifers. ..................57

Table 4.1 Pre-trial serological status of animals enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard to *Neospora caninum* and bovine viral diarrhoea virus. ..............................................78

Table 4.2 Proportion of animals that seroconverted to *Neospora caninum* when sampled six weeks after the second treatment in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard………………  80

Table 4.3 Abortion among animals from 5 farms according to age and initial serostatus to *Neospora caninum* in a clinical trial evaluating Bovilis Neoguard…………………………82

Table 4.4 Farm-specific efficacy of Bovilis Neoguard in reducing abortion in dairy herds with endemic *Neospora caninum* infection. ........................................................................................................83

Table 4.5 Proportion of calves seropositive for *Neospora caninum* when sampled at 6-9 months of age whose dams were enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard..............86

Table 4.6 Relative risk (RR) for a calf to be seropositive at 6-9 months of age according to dam serostatus and the attributable fraction (AF) of vertical transmission that was due to the dam being seropositive, with 95% confidence intervals, in a clinical trial of a *Neospora caninum* killed tachyzoite vaccine...................................................................................................87

Table 5.1 Number of animals enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard from 5 farms in New Zealand with a history of *Neospora caninum*-associated abortion.........................103

Table 5.2 Details of the cases of abortion in cows and heifers enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard from 5 farms in New Zealand with a history of *Neospora caninum*-associated abortion. ........................................................................................................105
Table 5.3 Diagnostic findings from 111 cases of abortion among 2246 cows and primiparous heifers enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard from 5 commercial dairy farms with a history of Neospora caninum-associated abortion................................................................. 106

Table 5.4 Maternal IFAT titre to Neospora caninum and estimated stage of gestation at which abortion occurred in 9 cases of abortion with histopathological evidence of N. caninum infection. ....................................................................................................................................................... 108

Table 5.5 Diagnostic findings from cases of abortion among cows and primiparous heifers from five farms with a history of Neospora caninum-associated abortion that were enrolled in a clinical trial of Bovilis Neoguard........................................................................................................... 110

Table 6.1 Days to abortion or parturition of ewes following intravenous inoculation with Neospora caninum at mid-gestation................................................................................................................................. 127

Table 6.2 Serological results for ewes related to the time of intravenous inoculation with N. caninum tachyzoites at mid-gestation. ................................................................................................................................................. 129

Table 6.3 PCR and histopathology results from ewe and lamb/fetus samples following intravenous inoculation with N. caninum tachyzoites at mid-gestation................................................................. 130

Table 7.1 Serological and PCR results at parturition from heifers and their progeny inoculated on Day 70 of gestation with Neospora caninum tachyzoites................................................. 154

Table 8.1 Treatment protocol for dairy heifers that were seronegative to Neospora caninum and that were mated at 16 months old................................................................. 177

Table 8.2 Serological and PCR results at parturition or abortion from heifers that were inoculated with either a mouse-passaged strain of Neospora caninum or serum-free tissue culture medium before mating and then were challenged with N. caninum tachyzoites or serum-free tissue culture medium on Day 70 of gestation ............................................................................. 180

Table 8.3 Summary of results of microsatellite alleles obtained from bovine tissue ....... 181
Table 9.1  Example of a partial budget that considers two alternative approaches to *N. caninum* control in a group of heifers in which 18 of 164 are seropositive to *N. caninum*...198

Table 9.2  Serological results of calves sampled within 12 hours of birth using the HerdChek Neospora ELISA.................................................................201

Table 9.3  A summary of findings from challenge studies involving the experimental inoculation of *Neospora caninum* in cattle.................................................................211
**Abbreviations**

- **AI**  Artificial insemination
- **BLAST**  Basic local alignment search tool
- **BVDV**  Bovine viral diarrhoea virus
- **CD**  Cluster of differentiation system
- **CI**  Confidence interval
- **CMI**  Cell-mediated immunity
- **CNS**  Central nervous system
- **CSF**  Cerebrospinal fluid
- **DAT**  Direct agglutination test
- **DMSO**  Dimethyl sulfoxide
- **DNA**  Deoxyribonucleic acid
- **dNTPs**  $2'$-deoxynucleotide 5'-triphosphate
- **ELISA**  Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
- **FBS**  Fetal bovine serum
- **H&E**  Haematoxylin and eosin
- **HIV**  Human immunodeficiency virus
- **IB**  Immunoblot
- **IBR**  Infectious bovine rhinotracheitis
- **ICT**  Immunochromatographic test
- **IFAT**  Indirect fluorescent antibody test
- **IFN**  Interferon
- **Ig**  Immunoglobulin
- **IHC**  Immunohistochemistry
- **IL**  Interleukin
- **ISCOM**  Immunostimulating complex
- **ITS**  Internal transcribed spacer
- **IVABS**  Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences (Massey University)
- **kDa**  Kilodalton
- **k/o**  *knock out*
- **MAT**  Microscopic agglutination test
- **MEM**  Minimum essential media
MLST  Multilocus sequence typing
MUAEC  Massey University Animal Ethics Committee
N. caninum  Neospora caninum
Nc-NZ  N. caninum New Zealand
NcSAG1  N. caninum surface antigen 1
NcSRS2  N. caninum surface antigen-1 related sequence 2
NK  Natural Killer
NPV  Negative predictive value
OD  Optical density
PAG  Pregnancy-associated glycoprotein
PAS  Periodic acid Schiff
PBS  Phosphate buffered saline
PCR  Polymerase chain reaction
PI  Persistently infected
PP  Percent positivity
PPV  Positive predictive value
PSM  Planned start of mating
PVDF  Polyvinylidene fluoride
RNA  Ribonucleic acid
ROC  Receiver operating characteristic
RR  Relative risk
RT-PCR  Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction
SAG  Surface antigen
SAS  Statistical analysis system
SD  Standard deviation
SDS  Sodium dodecyl sulphate
S/P ratio  Sample to positive ratio
TEM  Transmission electron microscopy
T. gondii  Toxoplasma gondii
Th  T cell helper
TGF  Transforming growth factor
TNF  Tumour necrosis factor
VMRD  Veterinary Medical Research and Development
VNT  Virus neutralisation test
Preface

This thesis is presented as a series of papers which have been published (or submitted for publication). Consequently, there is some repetition, particularly in the Material & Methods sections. Different formats between journals mean that the format of chapters within this thesis will also vary. The references for each chapter have been collated at the end of this thesis in the Bibliography.

The literature review (Chapter Two) provides basic details of the life cycle, epidemiology, clinical consequences and immune response to *Neospora caninum* infection in cattle with a detailed review of the diagnosis of neosporosis in cattle and current recommendations for its control.

Chapter Three details the risk of abortion in primiparous Friesian-cross dairy heifers according to their serostatus for *N. caninum*. The cattle on the study farm had been sampled quarterly for the previous six years to measure antibody to *N. caninum* following an abortion outbreak in 1997. The relative risk for abortion among ELISA-positive heifers was 23.6 compared to the seronegative heifers and eleven of seventeen seropositive heifers aborted. These findings suggested that identification and culling of infected heifer replacements may be a cost-effective control option on farms with a history of abortion due to *N. caninum* infection.

In the same year as the prospective cohort study was being carried out, a killed vaccine containing *N. caninum* tachyzoites was licensed for use in New Zealand and several other countries. A large-scale clinical trial of this product was conducted over five commercial dairy farms in four regions of New Zealand that had a history of abortion associated with *N. caninum* infection (Chapter Four). A total of 2,246 cattle were enrolled in this trial of the first, commercially available vaccine with a claim to reduce the risk of abortion in cattle. The vaccine was found to have a significant effect on reducing abortion in one of five farms in this study suggesting that farm-specific effects need to be elucidated to identify farms which may benefit from such a product. Vaccination increased the risk of vertical transmission.
A thorough investigation was conducted on all cases of abortion from cows and heifers from the farms that were enrolled in the clinical trial. This consisted of histopathological examination of fetus and placenta as well as serological testing of the dam for antibody to *N. caninum* and bovine viral diarrhoea virus and compared to antibody status the time of at enrolment in the trial. A diagnosis of abortion due to *N. caninum* infection was made in nine of 34 cases of abortion where fetal histopathology was undertaken and on one of the five farms, there was no evidence that any of the 33 abortions were due to *N. caninum* infection. Although *N. caninum* was the most common cause of abortion on these farms, there were at least as many abortions that were associated with other infectious causes, or in which there was evidence of co-infection with other organisms. It is likely that the importance of *N. caninum* as a cause of abortion is over-estimated on some farms following the confirmation of its involvement in cases of abortion. Ongoing diagnostic efforts should be made to identify all causes of abortion on an affected farm as some may be able to be controlled and the removal of other immunological stressors may decrease the incidence of abortion in cows that are infected with *N. caninum*.

Pregnant sheep were used as a model for challenge prior to undertaking such studies in cattle due to their earlier onset of puberty, shorter gestation length and the lower cost. New Zealand isolates of *Neospora caninum* that had been kept in Vero cell culture at Massey University were used to produce the tachyzoite challenge in all subsequent studies. A strong dose-response relationship was observed with five of ten sheep aborting when challenged with $5 \times 10^3$ tachyzoites intravenously at 70-90 days gestation and all sheep aborting at higher doses. Additionally, it was found that there was little agreement between two different serological methods used to detect antibody to *N. caninum* in these animals which called into question the use of the indirect fluorescent antibody test on sheep sera.

A challenge study involving the inoculation of pregnant cattle with *Neospora caninum* tachyzoites on Day 70 of gestation was then conducted. Intravenous inoculation with $2 \times 10^8$ tachyzoites resulted in seroconversion in all eight heifers but only one heifer subsequently aborted, suggesting that the New Zealand isolates were of low virulence. A novel challenge model involving the application of tachyzoites to an abraded oral mucosa resulted in seroconversion in one of eight heifers, two calves from these heifers were seropositive and *N. caninum* DNA was found in samples from three other heifer-calf pairs in this group. These results were consistent with the hypothesis that aborting and
parturient cattle may be a source of infection for other cattle that become infected by direct horizontal transmission if tachyzoites gain entry to the bloodstream via lesions in the oral mucosa.

The final study involved a two-by-two trial design in which cattle were inoculated with either *N. caninum* tachyzoites that had been passaged through mice or with serum-free tissue culture media prior to mating. Pregnant heifers within each group were then randomly allocated to inoculation with either *N. caninum* tachyzoites or serum-free tissue culture media on Day 70 of gestation. Other authors had reported that pre-mating inoculation with *N. caninum* tachyzoites was protective against abortion when cattle were subsequently challenged. A challenge dose of $2 \times 10^9$ tachyzoites intravenously was chosen to increase the risk of abortion. Two of six heifers aborted that had previously been inoculated with *N. caninum* tachyzoites aborted when subsequently challenged as opposed to five of six heifers aborting that received a *N. caninum* tachyzoite challenge on Day 70 of gestation and had previously been inoculated with serum-free tissue culture media. This study casts doubt on the efficacy of pre-mating inoculation with live tachyzoites to prevent abortion due to *N. caninum*.

For each chapter my input was greatest. The preliminary ideas for some of the studies were a collaboration of several of the authors but I devised the details of the research, undertook the fieldwork, analysed the data and wrote the manuscripts. I was, however, assisted by my co-authors and a declaration of authors’ contribution to each paper is included at the conclusion of each chapter that reports a published paper. Further assistance such as technical work and editorial input is reported in the Acknowledgements section of each chapter.

All experiments documented in this body of work were approved by the Massey University Animal Ethics Committee as documented within each chapter.