

# Surgical Success

April 26



*Sophie doing an RDA with an operating table set up. The bucket of brown fluid was removed from this cow's abomasum so we could then correct the twist.*



*Jess doing a sheep Caesar*



*A cow's unfortunate accident being stitched up by Hannah*

We have been monitoring our surgical success for many years now. Over the years our recording has improved and we are now able to see what factors influence our surgical success. After a painstaking few hours learning to navigate spreadsheet pivot tables, I have analysed our 2025 data (157 surgeries) and I thought I would share some of the discussion points it has raised.

Most farms will have had surgery performed on their cows at one point or another.

The most common surgeries we perform are:

- Caesarean section
- Left or right displaced abomasum (LDA or RDA) operations
- Digit amputation
- Calf hernia operation
- Tail amputations due to injury
- Enucleations (eye removal due to injury or infection)

Cattle LDA operations and caesareans are the surgeries we carry out the most, so the majority of what we talk about will relate to the factors that affected their success rate. However, a lot of it will be relevant to other operations and surgeries in other species as well.

1. Farm conditions - how clean is the operating area? Good light makes it easier to see exactly what we are doing and to spot contamination.

| Contamination | Failure | Success | Grand Total | Success Rate |
|---------------|---------|---------|-------------|--------------|
| 1             | 5       | 57      | 62          | 91.9         |
| 2             | 7       | 56      | 63          | 88.9         |
| 3             | 2       | 14      | 16          | 87.5         |
| 4             | 3       | 8       | 11          | 72.7         |
| 5             |         | 3       | 3           | 100.0        |

2. Is the animal healthy or sick at the time of operating? One of the factors that makes a dramatic difference to our caesarean success rate is whether the cow is down (recumbent) or standing and whether the calf is alive or not. Both those things will be more likely when intervention is delayed.

| Recumbency?                     | Failure | Success | Grand Total | Success Rate |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|-------------|--------------|
| No                              | 3       | 33      | 36          | 91.7         |
| Yes: Started and stayed down    | 3       | 5       | 8           | 62.5         |
| Yes: Went down during procedure | 1       | 2       | 3           | 66.7         |

| Foetal Condition | Failure | Success | Grand Total | Success Rate |
|------------------|---------|---------|-------------|--------------|
| Alive            | 2       | 27      | 29          | 93.1         |
| Dead <24 hours   | 4       | 13      | 17          | 76.5         |
| Dead >24 hours   | 1       |         | 1           | 0.0          |

3. Level of assistance has a significant affect on outcomes and farmers make the best assistants! We do try to have two vets attend complicated or possibly problematic surgeries and so do not be alarmed when we turn up mob-handed.

| Assistance       | Failure | Success | Grand Total | Success Rate |
|------------------|---------|---------|-------------|--------------|
| Farmer           |         | 9       | 9           | 100.0        |
| None             | 3       | 4       | 7           | 57.1         |
| Second Vet       | 4       | 25      | 29          | 86.2         |
| Student/Vet Tech |         | 2       | 2           | 100.0        |

The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) 2026 is open and there is lots of kit available with the 50% grant money to go towards the cost. Calving gates are included and if you ask any farmer that has one they will tell you they are well worth the money - **and now you could get one for half the cost, you cannot lose!** As well as being great for assisting with calvings and surgeries, they are also great for restraining a cow post calving so you can check the udder and assist the calf with the initial colostrum feed.



Calving gate in action

## Post Op Infections

Peritonitis is a potential complication of abdominal surgery. The peritoneum is the thin layer of film that covers all the organs in the abdomen. It is the last layer we cut through when performing caesareans or LDAs; you will know when we are through because you hear a rush of air. Operations where the surgery site has been contaminated can lead to infection of the peritoneum, this is called peritonitis. Peritonitis is extremely painful and, if allowed to progress, can lead to severe milk drop/loss of body condition and even death. Where animals survive, successful re-breeding is less likely.

## Maintaining sterility

We all aim to carry out surgery as cleanly as possible, but being on a farm means that we can never reach levels of sterility achieved by doctors in operating theatres. However, there are ways you can help us be as safe as possible.

All surgery begins with clipping up and cleaning the area you are going to incise. Clean buckets with warm, clean water help us start as we mean to go on. Once that area is cleaned and the vet is then scrubbing up and putting on their gown, that area is OUT OF BOUNDS to anyone not 'scrubbed in'. Farmers' hands are generally quite a long way from being sterile! Although you may have dunked them in the bucket of hibi-scrub, they will definitely not be clean. The cuffs and sleeves of your boiler suit/coat are another source of contamination, so rolling them up properly or removing them is essential. The most common assistance we will ask for is help pulling the calf out during a caesarean or holding clamps and so wearing clean rectal gloves when helping with these tasks will help reduce the contamination risk. Equally, the surgery kit (anything wrapped in blue paper) is sterile and must not be touched.

## Aftercare

### 1. Antibiotics and pain relief

In almost all cases the vet will leave you antibiotics for the cow to give post operatively.

Although the patient may improve quickly in the days after the operation, it is very important to finish the whole course of antibiotics. Usually, we prescribe a 3-5 day course of antibiotics. If the operation has been prolonged or there has been obvious contamination, we may use different types of antibiotics to our standard and prescribe a longer course.

Not finishing a course of antibiotics accelerates the risk of antibiotic resistance and may leave the patient vulnerable to post-op infections.

### 2. Wound management

LDA and caesareans leave a wound on the flank of the animal. Most wounds should be completely healed up by two to three weeks post op when the stitches can be removed.

#### Ways to help with wound healing:

- Keep cow cubicles/sheds clean- if the cows are lying in dirty conditions the chances of wound infection are increased
- Spray the wound with antibiotic/aluminium spray for 3 days post op (you will be injecting the cow with antibiotics anyway)
- Keep an eye on the wound- often bits of straw get stuck in the wound and this can act as a nidus for infection- keep it clean

#### Things to watch out for:

- Severe swelling around the wound- some swelling is normal
- Severe bleeding or pus leaking from the wound- again a little bit of bleeding is normal in the few days post op
- If the stitches have come undone, cows can sometimes catch their wounds and rip their stitches. If this is noticed, call us straight away

### 3. General Nursing Care

Proper nursing of cows post-surgery can have a strong influence on the success and speed of their recovery. Ensuring access to adequate fresh food and water and a clean bed of sufficient depth to avoid excess pressure on their limbs is vital.

Putting cows in individual pens in the immediate post-surgery period allows them to get over the effects of any sedation and allows recovery without being bullied by cows that pick on weaker members of the herd. At the very least, it allows the antibiotic/aluminium spray to dry properly before it is licked off by a curious friend!

#### Follow Up

Do expect multiple phone calls from us after a surgery, as we like to see how our patients are doing and ensure things are going well. If there are issues post-surgery we will want to know about them as soon as possible, so do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns.

## Vet Tech update



It's time for Biological fly control -  
if you'd like to know more information  
please contact Rosie on 07500 311382

All the best,

Will

