

14<sup>th</sup> October 2011.

The secretary  
Senate Rural Affairs and Transport Committee  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



I am a cattle and sheep veterinarian with 46 years professional experience. At various times I have been registered to practice and have done so in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.

For 22 years of this time I was company vet and livestock manager of a large pastoral company and was instrumental in increasing the cattle herd to 25,000 head and the sheep flock to 220,000 head. Over this period I have exported breeder, feeder and fat stock to many overseas destinations.

I have viewed the Animals Australia/Four Corners footage of the 4 steers being slaughtered, presented as being filmed at the 'Jalan Stasiun' slaughter house at Medan, Sumatra. I wish to comment in particular about the black steer, the subject of some correspondence to your committee from others.

This animal was obviously very agitated in comparison with the other three, pre-slaughter.

In my opinion, it is probable that this steer was affected by a hypomagnesaemia/hypocalcaemia condition called 'Transit Tetany' on arrival at the slaughterhouse. The clinical signs of excitability, incoordination, muscle tremors and epileptic type convulsions seen in the footage are characteristic of this condition in my experience.

Before attempting a diagnosis, a competent veterinarian would establish an accurate case history of:

- Feedlot rations. Whether the mineral supplement contained adequate magnesium and calcium, also the phosphorus and nitrogen levels which influence the chance of this metabolic problem occurring in susceptible animals.
- Transport from feedlot to abattoir. Particularly length and time of transport, condition of the roads, stock density on the truck and quality of the stock crate.
- Storage conditions at the abattoir. The length (if any) of spelling the stock and whether feed or water were supplied, pre slaughter.
- Whether blood samples were collected and analysed from clinically affected or non affected animals.

The reports by three 'experts' give no indication that any history was sought or any of these procedures were performed. It is therefore impossible for anyone to arbitrarily discount transit tetany as affecting this black steer in question.

The CEO of the RSPCA, in her letter to your Committee dated 29<sup>th</sup> September 2011, stated in dot point 3 that

“The Black Steer is not suffering from Transit Tetany”

This statement is ridiculous and unsupported by any concrete evidence.

This metabolic disturbance, also called 'Grass Tetany' when it occurs in lactating cows running on lush green pastures, is not uncommon in Australia.

I have also seen cases in:

- Mobs of recently weaned beef calves.
- Feed lot cattle that were spooked into a midnight rush by a severe thunder storm.
- Feral mickey bulls flushed out of thick bush in North Australia by helicopters, during the TB eradication program.

The incidence of this tetany in a mob is low, but the mortality is high in non treated affected animals. The range of clinical signs evidenced is similar to those exhibited by the black steer, the subject in question, and transit tetany cannot be excluded from the differential diagnosis of his condition, as seen in the video footage.

Yours faithfully

M T Back BVSc  
Diploma of Business Management  
Harvard University  
Graduate School of Business