

Assisting difficult births in animals

Taruinga Magwirotu

Difficult births- also known as dystocia- happen in animals from time to time. Read about possible causes of dystocia here: <https://livestockmatters.blog/2019/04/04/dystocia-everything-you-need-to-know-about-difficult-birth-part-1/>

This article specifically deals with difficult birth in cattle, though the general principles apply to all farm animals. When dystocia happens, it is important that the farmer or extension worker knows how to help the animal and try to save both the mother and offspring.

The first thing to remember: dystocia is always an emergency. Attend to it promptly.

How do you diagnose a dystocia? At what point does a normal birth become a difficult birth?

Three stages of labour

For convenience, labour is usually divided into 3 stages:

First Stage:-(2-6 hours) Preparatory stage associated with mild contractions of muscles of the womb (uterus). The animal is uncomfortable. It isolates itself from others; it is uneasy; nest-building in some animals. The end of the first stage is the breaking of the water bag, which signals the second stage of labour.

Second Stage:- (1 hour or less). When water bag break, viscous (thick) fluid flows out and part of water bag shows at the vulva. Parts of the calf show out-either the front legs and head (anterior presentation) or the tail and back (posterior presentation). Muscles of the stomach (abdomen) together with muscles of the uterus help push the calf out.

Third Stage of labour:- (2-8 hours after birth). Expulsion of afterbirth. Normally a diagnosis of retained afterbirth is made the following day after birth when the afterbirth has not come out.

What can go wrong and how to intervene

In most cases, we only realise that dystocia is happening when an animal fails to negotiate the second stage. That is, the water bag has broken/failed to break, the animal has been straining for hours but the calf is not coming out. Parts of the calf may be sticking out, while the rest is inside. Sometimes nothing sticks out.

What to do.

Always have a bucketful of soapy water ready for disinfection and lubrication of hands. Birth canal lubrication can be done using cooking oil.

Examine animal. Is it bright? Does it have the energy? Can it push? Is it exhausted?

Examine the dystocia situation. What is wrong? The most common way of doing this is first put your hand inside to check the disposition of the calf. Is the calf too big? Is the calf **presentation** normal (anterior presentation with front legs and head). Is calf's **posture** correct (i.e. extended forelegs and head)? Is the calf facing upwards or downwards?

The best way to find out is by tying calving ropes to the presenting parts of the body. Then you push the calf inwards into the womb to create more working space. You then have to make a decision on:

1. Is the calf over-sized? If the calf is slightly over-sized but presenting normally, using calving ropes to pull out and assist the cow's straining resolves the case. **NB: Use moderate force, synchronised with cow's efforts.** Pull downwards, in rotation motion to manoeuvre the calf out of the hip area.
2. Abnormal posture:- calf may have an abnormal posture. This means it may have a leg folding at the front knees (knee flexion), or shoulder flexion, or neck may be twisted to the side; it may have a breach or dog-sitting posture. All this can be easily found out by using your hands to feel what is wrong. Whatever abnormality, you must have in your mind the correct disposition: front legs extended, neck extended, head between front legs. This must be your target as you manoeuvre inside the womb.
3. Sometimes the calf is too big even to come outside with the assistance of calving ropes. Maybe it has become bloated or it's just too big. In that case, it is wise to ask for professional assistance.

Depending on outcome of the case, it is important to note that in the process of assistance, the uterus is likely to become infected by bacteria. Local (uterine tablet) and systemic antibiotic helps to prevent metritis (inflammation of uterus).

If calf is born **weak**, a vigorous rub of its chest may revive its life. Alternatively, the kiss of life (artificial breathing) may be necessary to revive it. Help it to suckle colostrum quickly.

If the animal fails to pass Stage 3, the condition is called retained afterbirth. Read about how to manage a retained afterbirth here: <https://livestockmatters.blog/2019/05/08/animal-health-retained-afterbirth/>

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