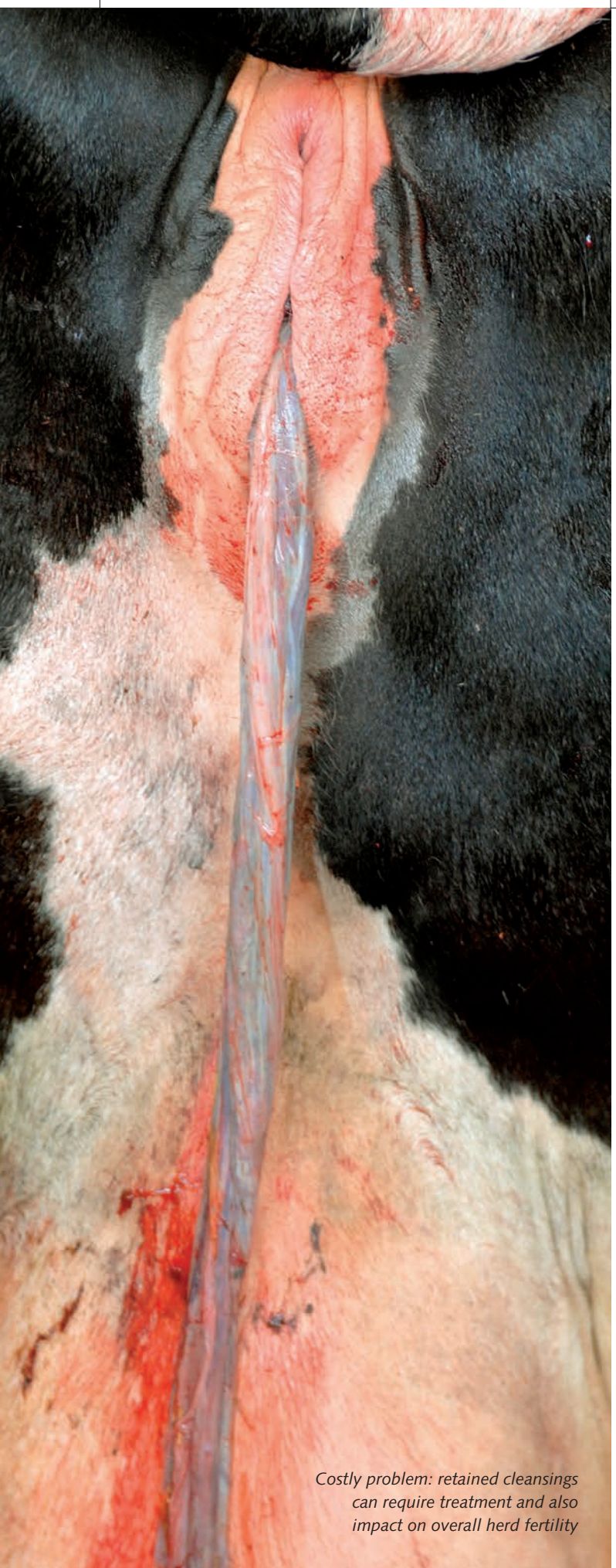

Costly problem: retained cleansings can require treatment and also impact on overall herd fertility

Preventing post-calving difficulties starts at grass roots level

A pungent problem

Retained placentas can occur in up to half of the herd, at an average cost of £350 per case. We spoke to three specialists to find out why this problem seems to be prevalent in some herds and what steps producers can take to help prevent it.

text **Allison Matthews**

Larger calves, twins, premature births, unnecessary manual interference, and infectious diseases such as IBR and BVD are all guilty of causing a placenta to be retained beyond 12 hours.

And nutrition should also be acknowledged as having a significant part to play, according to Thompsons' dairy specialist Richard Moore. "With some producers seeing more retained cleansings this year, possibly more than ever before, the first item under investigation should be forage," he says. "High potassium levels in grass silages contribute significantly to the incidence of sub-clinical milk fever. With levels ranging between 1% and 4%, potassium in grass silage is variable and is usually dictated by the level found in the soil or the stage of maturity of the grass at harvest."

Milk fever and, more importantly, sub-clinical milk fever are recognised as being key factors in the incidence of retained placentas. In many cases the foetal membranes will detach from the cow's uterus but, due to sub-clinical milk fever, weak contractions will fail to expel the placenta. In areas where grass silage is the forage of choice this is becoming a greater problem as discussed by vet Keith Sheridan from County Tyrone.

"This year forage does seem to be a catalyst for milk fever in a lot of herds. The cold weather in spring 2013 meant that there was a burst of grass growth in May when potassium levels are already naturally high. This is hitting producers now as they feed the silage that is high in potash."

Thomson and Josephs' forage mineral specialist James Bretherton has seen this trend approaching for more than 12 years and warns of its impact. "In 2012 the temperatures improved in mid April, making potash reserves in the soil readily available for the green leafy grass that grew in May. This made the potassium levels rocket. When combined with the cumulative effect of slurry and fertiliser the mineral levels now found in silage can be unsettling."

The company analyses hundreds of forages samples from across the UK every year and have data that warrants consideration. "In

Richard Moore: "Analyse minerals and be prepared to change forage"

Keith Sheridan: "Identifying sub-clinical milk fever is only the start"

James Bretherton: "Feeding silage that's high in potassium is unsettling"

2011 forage analysis was showing potassium levels of 2.64% and in 2013 these were 2.89%. On a practical basis the dry cow forage needs to be below 2% whereas levels above that pose a much greater risk of subsequent problems," warns Mr Bretherton.

Increasing costs

When there is a single incidence of a retained cleansing, due to a big calf or twins, it can be immediately explained. Unfortunately retained cleansings are often not isolated incidents and producers usually get a run of them. This is when the vet and the nutritionist need to be called on to help investigate the cause. "When sub-clinical milk fever is identified as a potential trigger for retained cleansings, herd management needs to be reviewed. The starting point is the dry period – what was the body condition score at drying off, were they dried off too early and was the DCAD balanced," adds Mr Sheridan.

The lengthening of the calving interval and the impact on overall herd fertility are just part of the cost associated with retained cleansings. "You have to treat the individual, sometimes with fluids or antibiotics. It all depends on how the animal is coping. With regard to removing the placenta, usually the less interference there is the better the outcome.

"Every case is different and many take much longer than four days to expel it naturally. There are oxytocin products available that can prove useful, but these all add to the total cost. When producers record information it becomes far easier to identify the cause of the milk fever and work towards resolving that. Prevention is better than cure."

Damage limitation

As with any production disease the causes of milk fever are multi-factorial and so identifying how to prevent it becomes a wide ranging exercise. Mr Moore explains how maintaining a healthy cow before and after calving is the first step. "Daily exercise, cleanliness of calving facilities and immediate access to water for rehydration after birth all play a role. In the long term, planning ahead for the forthcoming grass season is advisable and includes leaving a portion of ground aside that is earmarked for dry cows. This land should already be low in K index (0 or 1) and receive little or no slurry or fertiliser K. This practise has worked well on the units adopting the strategy," adds Mr Moore.

However for those faced with a problem in the here and now, having a summer plan is fine but will not alter the current situation.

Mr Moore advises carrying out a mineral analysis immediately. "If possible change forages and, ideally, bring in whole crop, straw, maize or more mature grass silage. These forage alternatives offer the benefit of much lower potassium levels with whole crop sitting at 1.2%.

"The use of anionic salts, such as magnesium chloride, will also have a beneficial effect on reducing the DCAD of the diet. Ideally producers should be taking action now to gain both short- and long-term control of the situation," adds Mr Moore. |

Fresh start: a healthy cow will experience fewer problems post-calving