

Stepping up the fight against Bovine Brucellosis

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Bovine brucellosis is a disease caused by the bacterium *Brucella abortus* that leads to reproductive failure in infected cattle and to production losses in affected herds. The organism may also cause potentially serious illness in people who have contact with infected animals or drink unpasteurised, contaminated milk. Control of the disease is therefore essential to protect human health, animal health, food security and farmers' incomes.

There has been an increase in the incidence of bovine brucellosis in South Africa over the last five-to-ten years. Reasons for this increase are unclear but may include changes in risk factors (increase in cattle density and/or movement, altered trading patterns), together with changes in the efficacy of surveillance and/or control measures (diagnostic tests, vaccination, movement control). Information from some provinces suggests that the increase is particularly severe among non-commercial or smallholder farms.

The Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria recently held a three-day workshop on brucellosis research. The workshop took place at the Onderstepoort Campus and was attended by local and international experts, researchers, state veterinary representatives, programme managers, and industry representatives. It was funded by the Belgian Technical Cooperation with assistance from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). Dr Owen Denny, of the Northern Ireland Co-operation (NI-CO), was invited to participate as an expert and his trip to South Africa was sponsored by NI-CO.

Dr Mike Modisane, Chief Director: Animal Health and Production of the DAFF, opened the workshop and welcomed all. Prof Darrell Abernethy, Dean of the Faculty, gave a brief presentation on the objectives of the workshop and introduced the invited experts, Dr Owen Denny, Prof Fernando Boinas from Portugal, Dr Bruno Garin-Bastuji from France and Dr Gift Matope from Zimbabwe. The first day of the workshop consisted of presentations by, and discussions with, the invited experts. The remainder of the workshop was devoted to group sessions during which research questions were identified, discussed and prioritised.

The ultimate goal of the workshop is to reduce the incidence and impact of bovine brucellosis through increased programme effectiveness that is evidence-based, and guided and supported by appropriate and needs-driven research. Research priorities identified during this workshop included determining the true prevalence of bovine brucellosis in the country, and identifying key factors that increase the risk of brucellosis or hinder the effectiveness of the current control programme. An important outcome of the workshop, seen as a milestone in the fight against brucellosis, was a comprehensive list of research questions for adoption by research institutions in partnership with the government.

- Author Lesego Teffu