

# BULL EMERGENCY IS ANOTHER FIRST

MY driving prowess has become legendary within Synergy Farm Health. A quick succession of crunches, bumps, flats and cracked oil sumps has earned me the reputation of "the girl with the courtesy vehicle", the "smashed in back door" girl and "Speedy Gonzalez" and this within the first six months of my farm animal internship.

My reputation has even spread to the clients with comments such as "same van two weeks on the trot? That's progress, Emily" and one client gave me directions by including "your bridge" as one of the key markers along the route – a bridge made famous by my collision with a rather smart BMW.

My experience on the road has, however, stood me in good stead and, hopefully, improved my speed awareness and empathy for other road users – and one day that was especially useful.

## Rocky start

I had a rocky start to the day – a calving, 12 hours after the cow had been seen to start straining. A dead oversized calf was the problem and a C-section was prescribed. A senior colleague came to assist as I was close to the practice and a three-hour grapple ensued. The cow had forgotten its manners in the time spent calving and proceeded to wrestle with me and the senior surgeon. Sterility was maintained to the best of our ability and the surgery was eventually completed.

On the way back to the practice, I took a call on my CB radio. "Red Squirrel, we've taken a call from the police. There has been a major road traffic accident on the A35 (the major highway through Dorset) and the police have asked you to attend. A bull is trapped in an overturned trailer."

I immediately started to make my way to the incident but was 30 minutes away. This time was more than sufficient to play through all possible scenarios in my mind.



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Ultimately, as a veterinary surgeon, the police would expect me to make a decision about safety, taking into consideration the safety and welfare of the animal in question but, more importantly, the people near the highway. My decisions would potentially have implications for other humans' safety.

Most farm vets know bulls are never to be trusted. Some beef bulls can have very relaxed temperaments and when not near bulling animals, can be a pleasure to work with. However, a dairy bull must never be trusted. From the grumpy and ill-mannered Holstein to the "little-man syndrome Jersey" they are generally ill-mannered, moody and a hazard to work with if facilities are poor. I had no information about the breed or age of bull in my trailer and while I may have hoped for a beef bull, the stress of being overturned could have turned the most placid of bulls into a raging muscle machine.

As a final year student at the University of Cambridge, I had the opportunity to work with the local fire and rescue team learning about equine and large animal assistance. One of the key points I remembered from the course was that you must never release a stricken animal from a trailer, unless you have clearly identified where you are immediately going to secure and restrain it. Animals should be sedated where appropriate and, until a safe path is clear, the

animal must remain secured in its transport vehicle.

Although the A35 is littered with farms, there were few within the stretch of the police coordinates and even fewer that would have suitable bull facilities.

My first concern was for the people involved. An overturned livestock trailer is every farmer's worst nightmare. As well as the obvious implications for the transported animals, the trailer could have trapped passers-by, the driver could have been injured and other people may have driven cars into the stricken vehicle. Would I find fatalities on my arrival?

As the vet my next concern would be the safety and welfare of the animal. The potential injuries I could find on my arrival haunted me for the majority of the journey. A broken leg? Cuts and punctures? A trapped and distressed animal? The possibilities were endless and I reassured myself that I had both my sedative and euthanasia chemicals on board.

I was fortunate to have picked up one of our veterinary technicians en route. She had been on her way to blood-sample a large flock of sheep for the maedi visna accreditation scheme with one of the vets, but instead had been diverted to assist me with the emergency. We approached the Monkey Jump roundabout, one of the busiest in Dorset, and found a police

blockade. We were waved through by a police officer. The road was closed approximately three miles from the site of the accident.

The cordon made it increasingly apparent how concerned the police were. The road was empty and a 10-minute drive later we arrived at our destination. An overturned Defender was our first glimpse of the accident, followed by the trailer, lying on its flank. The roof had been unravelled like a sardine tin and there was no bull in site. Panic set in – would I need a marksman?

## Already tethered

I was reassured by the police officer in charge, who said: "Don't panic, the bull is safe in someone's garden with its handler. It was a show bull on the way to a county show. It's pretty beaten up so we would like you to check it over. There's blood everywhere. The handler is okay though."

The bull was of high merit and on its way to a premier event. It was a fully-grown Hereford bull that had already been tethered in the trailer. Its handler was Jim.

"Hello darling, we've had a rough day. I need you to check over Lightning – he has a big gash on his side and a foot injury. We've still got two hours to travel before we reach home."

Lightning was a very impressive, mature Hereford bull, nicely tethered in a local garden and behind two double gates. As a part-time sheep farmer, I am incredibly conscious about gateways. The more gates between an animal and a highway, the better.

Lightning had indeed sloughed a dewclaw and had a 50cm wound on his flank, presumably from colliding with the wall of the trailer. Remarkably, he was as cool as a cucumber and his show preparation had stood him in good stead for his clearly stressful day.

I was reluctant to sedate Lightning if avoidable, as if suitable, he needed to be transported home as soon as possible. I was satisfied he was completely sound and his injuries would not compromise him in transport and that sedation should be avoided as long as this was safe for myself and his handlers and, ultimately, for Lightning.

A makeshift crush was created and the wounds inspected. The 50cm wound varied from highly superficial to full thickness through both the skin and upper muscle layer. Skin preparation began with the aid of my veterinary technician. "Don't worry about him darling, having a bath is second nature



Lightning after his wound was stitched.

for this bull," assured Jim, and he was right. Lightning stood like a trouper as his wound was clipped and local anaesthetic inserted around the trauma site. Dissolvable sutures were placed in the muscle layer and a combination of nylon sutures and staples placed in the skin. I put Lightning on a course of antibiotics, a trusty anti-inflammatory and Jim was advised to call out Lightning's own vet for re-examination once settled at home. His dewclaw was left un-bandaged. We didn't have the facilities to pick up his foot to dress it suitably without sedation and I was satisfied he was both sound and in minimal pain.

As a sheep breeder with an interest in show stock, I am all too aware of the cosmetic importance of these animals. While estimated breeding values should (in my opinion) be ranked above all parameters for the measure of an animal's value, ultimately, shows assess the visible attributes of an animal and its similarities to breed descriptions/standard. In short, a shoddy stitch-up could have implications for the showing potential of this young bull.

## Valuable beast

I sometimes find this prospect a concern. I have had the privilege of working with animals of immense monetary value and with others of immense owner value, but little monetary. Lightning was that rare combination of both. Although I tried not to consider this when stitching up his flank, he was potentially worth the price of a new car or luxury holiday.

Even more evident than this though, was the value he had to Jim. Jim wasn't Lightning's owner (purely his handler and transporter) and this particular journey had nearly cost them



**EMILY GASCOIGNE** is a graduate of the University of Cambridge who began an internship with the RVC in association with Synergy Farm Health in July 2012. She has a particular interest in dairy medicine and surgery and sheep flock management.

both their lives. The combination of a shifting bull and a road pothole had nearly resulted in a catastrophe.

Jim's relief was apparent and the persistent ringing of his telephone from concerned friends, family and colleagues was testament to the relief of others. He was clearly concerned about the bull and the fact there was no need for sedation throughout the procedure was testimony to Jim's skill at handling bulls and the breeding of the animal.

A cup of sweet tea later for Jim, and a clean-up for me and my veterinary technician meant we were ready to hit the road and resume our prearranged clinical duties.

My calamitous experience on the roads had prepared me for the traumatic day both the bull and owner had been through. It re-emphasised the importance of sensible driving, taking precautions and not being a speed fiend. Hopefully for Jim, Lightning won't strike twice. ■



Travelling to the site of the accident gave the author plenty of time to consider the possibilities of what she might find on arrival.