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Cows becoming clinically lame differ in changes in behaviour and physiology compared to cows that do not become clinically lame

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Abstract

The hypothesis that sensors can detect changes in behaviours and physiologies associated with cows becoming clinically lame was tested by comparing trends of sensor data from lame cows with non-lame cows. Sensor data included data from live weighing scales, pedometers (average steps per hour) and milk meters collected between November 2010 and June 2012 on five Waikato dairy farms. Farmers were trained in detecting and diagnosing lame cows. For each lameness event (n = 318 events affecting 292 cows) a time period of 14 days prior to the day of detection was randomly matched by farm and date to 10 non-lame cows. In this period, lame cows decreased in weight, steps taken per hour, milk yield in the first two minutes of milking, total milk yield, and milking duration. Lame cows also entered the milking platform later. In comparison, non-lame cows had no change in sensor data trends. These differences (P <0.05) in sensor data trends imply potential value of sensor data in detecting lameness automatically. Large variations in sensor data values between and within lame and non-lame cows indicated that future research should focus on combinations of variables that show the best potential to detect lameness automatically.

Keywords: dairy cow; lameness; sensor data patterns; detection

Introduction

Lameness is considered a significant health issue in the New Zealand dairy herd (Sauter-Louis et al. 2004; Chesterton et al. 2008). It is often grouped with mastitis and infertility in the top three dairy cow health issues (Gibbs & Laporte 2007). The condition affects the cow’s welfare as shown by abnormal behaviour (Juarez et al. 2003; Walker et al. 2008) and loss of body condition (Walker et al. 2008) and its association with pain (Whay et al. 1997; Bicalho et al. 2007). Lameness also influences farm profitability as it negatively affects reproductive performance and milk production and increases treatment costs and culling risk (Tranter & Morris 1991; Sprecher et al. 1997; Green et al. 2002).

In spite of the negative consequences of lameness, farmers do not perceive lameness as a major health issue (Leach et al. 2010) because they tend to underestimate the prevalence of lameness on their farm (Whay et al. 2002). Lame cows are usually detected by visual observation, for example by looking at a cow’s gait and back posture (Sprecher et al. 1997). However, Whay et al. (2002) reported a mean prevalence of lameness estimated by farmers of 5.7% whereas a trained observer recorded a mean prevalence on these farms of 22.1%. In this case approximately 74% of the lame cows were undetected by farmers. It is unclear what causes this low detection rate but possible explanations include the time-pressure that is put on farm staff, or that other health issues with more obvious costs, such as mastitis, attract farmer’s attention at the expense of lameness, or that farmers lack skills in detecting and controlling lameness (Leach et al. 2010). However, with herd sizes increasing (DairyNZ 2012) detecting lame cows visually is becoming more challenging. As automated technologies that monitor animal health are likely to become increasingly popular (Cuthbert 2008) automatic detection of lame cows may be a viable alternative to reliance on visual detection.

Sensors are available that monitor behavioural aspects such as activity and milking order, as well as physiological aspects such as live weight, milk yield and milking duration of cows at each milking. These data may be useful in automating the detection of lame cows. For example, given that lameness negatively affects milk yield (Green et al. 2002) it can be expected that milk yield would decline during the days before lameness became clinical, whereas one would not expect a decline in milk yield for non-lame cows. This study hypothesised that sensor data can be used to detect changes in behaviour and physiology associated with cows becoming clinically lame compared to non-lame cows.

Materials and Methods

This study was approved by the Ruakura Animal Ethics Committee.

Data collection

Data were collected on five Waikato dairy farms with a mean herd size of 770 cows, (range 432–1628) between November 2010 and June 2012. All five pasture-based farms had a rotary milking platform (Waikato Milking Systems, Hamilton, New Zealand) fitted with electronic cow identification systems, live weighing scales (Afikim, Kibutz Afikim, Israel) and electronic milk meters. All cows were fitted with pedometers (Afikim, Kibutz Afikim, Israel). All
Table 1 Total number of lameness events with a recorded observation date and sensor data that were recorded per farm, and the number of lameness events included in the statistical analyses and their assigned Lameness Score. The Lameness Scores represent the severity of the recorded lameness event with Score 2 = Mildly lame, Score 3 = Moderately lame, Score 4 = Lame and Score 5 = Severely lame. Lameness events without a Lameness Score assigned by the farmer were considered as missing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm</th>
<th>Number of lameness recordings</th>
<th>Number of lameness events analysed</th>
<th>Number of lameness events in each Lameness Score group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, 466 lameness events were recorded. Lame events recorded without date of observation were excluded (n = 39). Separate lameness events for the same cow for the same affected limb were defined when the time lag between two lameness events was >31 days; if the period was ≤31 days then the second lameness event recording was excluded (n = 12). Records on other health events including cow identification number, date of health event and type of health event such as clinical mastitis, artificial insemination and natural breeding (n = 43,047 records) were collected at the end of the study by extracting this information from the herd management software.

Farmers were visited every month to collect data on lameness. During these visits, lameness scoring forms were discussed with the farmer to ensure standardized recording throughout the study period. Sensor data and records of lameness and health events were merged within farm, cow identification number and date. After merging the data sets, records of lameness (n = 30) and health events (n = 12,295) without sensor data were excluded.

Definition of lame and non-lame episodes

Lame cows were defined as cows with at least one lameness event recorded. To ensure that sensor data were not affected by health events other than lameness or by calving events, lame events were excluded from further analyses when the cow was recorded to have another health event occurring from 14 days prior to the date of detection (D-14) recorded on Day 0 (D0) till seven days after detection (D7) (n = 27), and when D-14 fell within the first 30 days in milk (n = 34). This 22 day time period from D-14 to D7, was considered a lameness episode. Lameness episodes with less than 10 days of sensor data from D-14 through D0 were excluded (n = 6). Each lameness episode was randomly matched by farm and date with 10 non-lame cows, creating lameness blocks. Non-lame cows were defined as cows without recorded lameness events during the entire data collection period, without any health event recorded.
Figure 1 Daily means for Lame (●; n = 318) and Non-lame (○; n = 3,180) cows for (a) live weight, (b) activity, (c) milking order, (d) milk yield during the first two minutes, (e) total daily milk yield and (f) milking duration from Day -14 till Day -1 of lameness detection. The vertical bars in each plot represent the maximum standard error of the difference for time comparisons within the Lame group. Sensor data trends through time of Lame cows differ significantly (P <0.05) from Non-lame cows for all six sensor-based variables.

Sensor data measured at D0 through D7 were excluded from all cows to prevent sensor data being influenced by management practices after a cow was observed lame. This left a time period running from D-14 through D-1 for each cow within each lameness episode to be included in the statistical analyses. Differences in sensor data trends for each variable were analysed for D-14 through D-1 using a mixed model where the repeated measurements of each cow through time were modelled using an autoregressive order 1 covariance structure. The mixed model included Day, Lameness and the interaction of these two terms as fixed effects and Lameness Block, Cow within Lameness Block and Day within Cow as random effects. Differences in sensor data trends between Lame and Non-lame cows are indicated by the interaction term Day within Lame. To test differences in Lameness Score within the Lame group, Lameness Score, for values of 2 to 5 inclusive, and the interaction between Day and Lameness Score...
Figure 2 Box plots for the difference in activity (steps/hour) between Day -4 and Day -1 before lameness detection for Lame and Non-lame cows on each farm. The length of each box represents the interquartile range (distance between 25th and 75th percentile) with the group median presented by the horizontal line within the box. Each whisker indicates the range of values on that side of the median.

Results

Farmers recorded 385 lameness events with an observation date and sensor data available; the number of cases ranged from 24 cases at Farm 2 to 164 cases at Farm 1 (Table 1). After cleaning and preparing the data, 318 lameness episodes affecting 292 cows (5.9% Jersey, 29.7% Holstein, 64.4% New Zealand Crossbred) were included for statistical analyses. The largest proportion (46%) of these episodes involved cows that were moderately lame (Lameness Score 3) showing an abnormal gait and an arched back while walking and standing. Another 23% of cows were mildly lame (Lameness Score 2) showing a slightly abnormal gait and an arched back while walking only. Twenty-six per cent were lame or severely lame (Lameness Score 4 and 5).

Figure 1 plots the daily means for the six sensor-based variables for Lame (n = 318) and Non-lame (n = 3,180) cows during the time period of interest (D-14 through D-1). Over time, lame cows tended to lose weight, decreased their activity, entered the milking parlour later, with a decreased milk yield in the first two minutes and a decreased total milk yield, as well as taking a shorter time to milk. These sensor data trends through time differed significantly (P <0.05) between Lame and Non-lame cows for all six sensor-based variables.

Figure 2 shows the variation in the difference in activity between D-4 and D-1 for the Lame and Non-lame cow groups on each farm separately. The mean difference in activity for Lame cows is lower or similar compared to Non-lame cows on all five farms. The data indicate a wide range in activity within Lame and Non-lame cows on all farms and that there is a large overlap in activity differences between Lame and Non-lame cows across all the farms. Box plots for the other variables showed similar results with large variation in sensor values within and between the Lame and Non-lame groups of cows.

Weighted daily Activity averages by Lameness Score are plotted in Figure 3. On average, lame cows decreased their activity in the four days leading up to visual detection (D-4). This drop in activity was more pronounced with higher Lameness Scores. This trend of decreasing activity through time differed significantly (P <0.01) between Lameness Scores. Similar statistically significant patterns (P <0.05) between Lameness Scores were observed for all other production variables, except total milk yield (P = 0.15).

Discussion

Previous studies have reported that lameness affects a cow’s normal behaviour patterns. Lame cows increase their lying time (Juarez et al. 2003), spend less time walking and enter the milking parlour later (Walker et al. 2008) than non-lame cows. Lameness also negatively affects milk production (Green et al. 2002) and body condition (Walker et al. 2008). The current study agrees with results reported
in these previous studies demonstrating that lame cows start showing these reported negative effects before they were actually observed as being lame. In addition, the current study demonstrated that these negative trends through time for Lame cows are significantly different compared to Non-lame cows for all the six sensor-based variables and that these negative trends differ significantly, except for total milk yield, between Lameness Scores within the Lame group. With these results we have proved the hypothesis that sensor data can be used to detect changes in behaviour and physiology associated with cows becoming clinically lame compared to non-lame cows.

Our data also demonstrated that there is a wide variability in sensor data measured within and between the Lame and Non-lame cow groups (Figure 2). Part of this variation is attributable to the fact that sensors were not calibrated for study purposes. It could be debated whether it was better to use calibrated data from validated sensors. However, this study focussed on the potential of currently commercially available sensors as used on-farm for the automated detection of lameness, regardless of whether these sensors were calibrated often, as a normal maintenance practice, or not calibrated at all. The large variation in sensor data implies that sensor -based detection models using one variable are unlikely to be a sufficiently accurate predictor of lameness to identify cows requiring treatment. As a consequence ‘a one variable’ procedure is likely to miss too many lame cows and/or indicate too many non-lame cows as becoming lame; a false alert. This result is important because it means that predicting or detecting individual lame cows will be difficult. The accuracy of the procedure can be improved by combining sensor data. Combining sensor data to improve model performance has proven to be valuable in the field of automated detection of clinical mastitis (Kamphuis et al. 2008). Future research should focus on the combinations of variables that show the best potential to develop an automated lameness detection model.

**Conclusion**

Lame cows have significantly different behavioural and physiological sensor data trends compared to non-lame cows. Sensor data trends also differed significantly between a Lameness Score within lame cows for all variables except total milk yield. These differences imply potential value of using sensor data to predict lame cows. However, the large variation of sensor data values between and within the Lame and Non-lame groups of cows suggests that single variable detection models are unlikely to be accurate enough for predicting lameness. Therefore, future research should focus on combinations of variables that show the best potential for developing an automated lameness detection model.

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