



Behavioural patterns of pony foals after simultaneous and consecutive weaning

Manuela Wulf¹, Verena Dörstelmann², Christine Aurich^{1,2}

¹Centre for Artificial Insemination and Embryo Transfer, University of Vet Sciences, A-Vienna

²Graf Lehndorff Institute, Brandenburg State Stud, D-Neustadt (Dosse)

In this study, the behaviour of Shetland pony foals after weaning was analysed. Foals were either weaned simultaneously (group SW; n=7) by removing all mares at the same time and leaving the foals as a group or foals were weaned consecutively (group CW; n=4) by removing one mare per day on consecutive days. Behaviour of the foals was observed 3 times per day (6:00-8:00, 12:00-14:00 and 18:00-20:00) from one day before weaning to 7 days (group SW) or 10 days (group CW) after removing the first mare.

Vocalisation after removal mares was more frequent in foals weaned simultaneously (d 1: SW 66±37 per 2 hrs) than when mares were removed consecutively at one-day intervals (d1, i.e. removal of first mare: CW 3±2 per 2 hrs). In CW foals, vocalisation was most frequent on the day after removal of the last mare (day 5: 18±6 per 2 hrs), although it was lower than in SW foals on day 1 after weaning.

Locomotor activity was highest in SW foals on days 1 and 2 after weaning (maximum 17±6 movements per 2 hrs, p<0.05 vs. CW: <2 movements per 2 hrs at all times). Frequency of defaecation increased to 7±1 per 2 hrs on day 1 after SW (p<0.05 vs. group CW), it was 3±2 per 2 hrs in group CW at the time 3 mares had been removed and was below 2 at all other times in both groups. The time, foals spent in lateral recumbency and in sternal recumbency was reduced to near zero during the two days following weaning (group SW) and the period during which mares were removed consecutively (group CW).

Tactile contact between foals was increased in SW foals after weaning compared to CW foals during the period of consecutive weaning. Suckling on other foals increased in both groups for several days after weaning but did not differ between groups. No major changes over time or differences between groups were found for other behaviour parameters. Foals weaned simultaneously lost weight slightly but significantly (p<0.05) within two days after weaning (from 78±11 to 75±10) while no weight loss occurred in CW foals. In conclusion, SW elicited more pronounced behavioural changes than CW in pony foals. Consecutive weaning can be considered a more gentle method than SW and thus may be associated with lower risks and less stress for the foals.