During the autumn, the conception rate of dairy cattle in warm countries is low although ambient temperatures have decreased and cows are no longer exposed to summer thermal stress, indicating that there may be a delayed effect of heat stress on cattle fertility. Two experiments were conducted to examine possible delayed effects of heat stress on follicular characteristics and steroid production at two distinct stages of follicular growth: medium-sized and preovulatory follicles, 20 and 26 days after heat exposure, respectively. Lactating cows were subjected to heat stress for 12 h a day in an environmental chamber, during days 2–6 of a synchronized oestrous cycle. In Expt 1, ovaries were collected on day 3 of the subsequent cycle, before selection of the dominant follicle, and medium-sized follicles were classified as atretic or healthy. In Expt 2, on day 7 of the subsequent cycle, PGF$_{2\alpha}$ was administered and preovulatory follicles were collected 40 h later. In both experiments, follicular fluid was aspirated, granulosa and thecal cells were incubated, and steroid production was determined. In healthy medium-sized follicles (Expt 1), oestradiol production by granulosa cells and androstenedione production by thecal cells were lower ($P < 0.05$) and the concentration of progesterone in the follicular fluid was higher in cows that had been previously heat-stressed than in control cows ($P < 0.05$). In preovulatory follicles (Expt 2), the viability of granulosa cells was lower ($P < 0.05$) and the concentration of androstenedione in the follicular fluid and its production by thecal cells were lower ($P < 0.05$) in cows that had been previously heat-stressed than in control cows. In both experiments, the oestradiol concentrations in the follicular fluids were not altered by heat stress. These results demonstrate a delayed effect of heat stress on steroid production and follicular characteristics in both medium-sized and preovulatory follicles; this effect could be related to the low fertility of cattle in the autumn.

Introduction

The low summer fertility of about 60% of the world dairy cattle population is associated with high ambient temperatures. However, during the autumn, when air temperatures have decreased and cows are no longer exposed to thermal stress, conception rates remain lower than in the winter (Hansen, 1997). This observation may be explained by the facts that ovarian follicles are susceptible to heat stress (Badinga et al., 1993; Wolfenson et al., 1995) and that it takes about 40–50 days for small antral follicles to develop into large dominant follicles (Lussier et al., 1987). Thus, exposure to summer heat stress during the early stages of follicular development may impair later follicular function and decrease fertility in the autumn. Clear delayed effects of summer heat stress on follicular function have been observed: (i) a markedly low quality of oocytes collected after summer heat stress was associated with low developmental capability of embryos in vitro during the autumn (Roth et al., 1999); and (ii) alterations in the pattern of growth and development of medium-sized follicles associated with a marked increase in plasma FSH concentration were found during the first follicular wave of the oestrous cycle, subsequent to heat exposure (Roth et al., 2000a). A seasonal study has shown that oestradiol concentration in the follicular fluid and androstenedione production by thecal cells were both lower in dominant follicles collected in autumn than in those collected in winter (Wolfenson et al., 1997). However, seasonal studies provided only limited information regarding a delayed effect of heat stress on follicular steroidogenesis owing to their multifactorial nature and the fact that proper contemporary control animals could not be used in such studies.

The aim of the present study was to examine a possible delayed effect of acute heat stress on follicular characteristics. Steroid production by granulosa and thecal cells was...
studied at two distinct stages of follicular growth: in medium-sized follicles before selection of the dominant follicle and in preovulatory follicles 3–4 weeks after heat exposure ended.

**Materials and Methods**

Two experiments were conducted in the winter. Experimental design, tissue collection and cell incubation were identical in both experiments. Delayed effects of 5 days of heat exposure on steroid production were examined in medium-sized (Expt 1) and preovulatory (Expt 2) follicles.

**Animals**

Mature, cyclic Holstein dairy cows were selected for the study. All experimental cows were housed in identical chambers in the same shelter under the same husbandry conditions from 1 week before cows were assigned to the experimental groups to eliminate a possible confinement effect. The cows were in late lactation, yielding an average of 25 kg milk per day. The cows were fed a complete mixed ration containing 16.5% (w/v) crude protein and 1.65 Mcal per kg dry matter. This study has been reviewed and approved by the appropriate institutional animal care and use committee.

**Experimental protocol**

For synchronization of oestrus, an intravaginal progesterone insert (CIDR; Eazi Breed, Hamilton) was inserted for 9 days and 500 µg cloprostenol, a PGF$_{2\alpha}$ analogue (Estrumate; Coopers, Berkhamsted), was injected i.m. 7 days after insertion of the intravaginal progesterone implant. Cows were checked for signs of oestrus three times a day for 30 min each time. Cows expressing oestrus behaviour within 48 h after removal of the CIDR were included in the experiment. On day 2 of the oestrous cycle, after confirmation of ovulation by ultrasonography, cows were assigned randomly to either control or heat-stressed groups. All cows were kept in the same shelter and were milked in their housing environment. Control cows were housed in the chambers under normothermic conditions and heat-stressed cows were kept in similar chambers in which air temperature and relative humidity were increased to 36°C and 60%, respectively. Heat-stressed cows were exposed to thermal stress for 12 h a day, between 07:00 h and 19:00 h, during days 2–6 of the cycle. This early stage of the cycle was chosen because the first follicular wave is considered to be highly predictable in terms of follicular dynamics. Although a 5 day duration of thermal stress was sufficient to induce a significant immediate effect on follicular steroidogenesis, a possible delayed effect was not determined (Wolfenson et al., 1997). Accordingly, it was decided to examine the delayed responses to such a short heat stress in the time frame of the subsequent cycle, within 4 weeks after the end of heat exposure. At the end of heat exposure, on day 7 of the oestrous cycle, control and heat-stressed cows were grouped together and housed under normothermic conditions. In both experiments, on day 18 of the treated cycle, PGF$_{2\alpha}$ analogue (500 µg) was injected and cows showed signs of oestrus, on average, on day 21 of the cycle. This synchronization procedure enabled the interval between the end of heat exposure and the days in the subsequent cycle on which ovaries were collected to be set at a similar duration for all cows. Blood samples were collected once a day during days 2–19 in the treated cycle in both experiments, and during days 1–3 and days 1–7 of the subsequent cycle in Expt 1 and Expt 2, respectively. Blood samples were centrifuged at 2000 g for 20 min and plasma was stored at –20°C for determination of oestradiol and progesterone concentrations.

In Expt 1, ovaries from control (n = 6) and heat-stressed (n = 5) cows were collected on day 3 of the subsequent cycle, 20 days after heat exposure was ended. The day of ovary collection was selected to obtain the maximal number of medium-sized follicles of the first follicular wave before the suppressive influence of the dominant follicle (Ginther et al., 1989; Fortune et al., 1991). Follicular development was examined at 2 day intervals, from day 15 of the treated cycle to day 3 of the subsequent cycle, using an ultrasond instrument (model SSD-210DXII; Aloka, Tokyo) equipped with a 7.5 MHz transducer. Positions and sizes of follicles and corpora lutea in the ovaries were traced at each scanning and the exact location of the follicles was recorded. This procedure enabled individual follicles to be identified accurately during dissection of the ovaries and selection of medium-sized follicles that had grown during the first follicular wave of the subsequent cycle and not those from the previous (treated) cycle.

In Expt 2, heat stress was applied on days 2–6 of the cycle, as described for Expt 1. On day 7 of the subsequent cycle, PGF$_{2\alpha}$ analogue (500 µg) was injected to induce regression of the corpus luteum and development of the first wave preovulatory follicle and, after a further 40 h, ovaries were collected from both heat-stressed (n = 4) and control (n = 5) cows. Comparison of the morphology of the ovaries with the ultrasonography records obtained on days 2, 4, 6 and 8 of the subsequent cycle enabled easy identification of the preovulatory follicles.

**Tissue collection and cell incubation**

Ovaries from experimental cows were collected at the abattoir after the cows were killed. During dissection of the ovaries, the follicular diameter was measured with callipers and follicular fluid from each follicle was aspirated and stored separately at –20°C for determination of steroid concentrations. The granulosa and thecal cells were isolated from medium-sized follicles (6–9 mm in diameter; Expt 1) or preovulatory follicles (Expt 2), dispersed enzymatically and cultured separately. The viability of granulosa and thecal cells was determined with 0.1% (w/v) trypan blue as described previously (Meidan et al., 1990; Wolfenson et al., 1999, Shores et al., 2000). Long-term
experience in our laboratory has shown that low viability of
granulosa cells, as assessed by trypan blue, is associated
closely with oestradiol:progesterone concentration ratios
< 1 in the follicular fluid. For example, Shaham-Albalancy
et al. (2000) found that granulosa cell viability and
oestradiol and progesterone concentrations in the follicular
fluid of healthy and atretic follicles were 66%, 31 ng ml–1
and 16 ng ml–1 versus 35%, 1 ng ml–1 and 77 ng ml–1,
respectively. Accordingly, in Expt 1, medium-sized follicles
that expressed low viability of granulosa cells were
classified as atretic follicles and were not subjected to
further examination; the cell viability of these follicles was
21.3 ± 5.4 and 18.6 ± 2.8% in control and heat-stressed
cows, respectively. Follicles that had > 50% viability of
granulosa cells were classified as healthy follicles and were
subjected to further examination. The status of the healthy
medium-sized follicles was verified later by the observation
of a > 1 ratio of oestradiol:progesterone in the follicular
fluid (Ireland and Roche, 1983). Cells (105
viable cells per well) from individual healthy follicles were
incubated in a final volume of 0.5 ml in a 24-well plate
(Nunc, Kampstrup) in Dulbecco’s minimum essential
medium with Ham’s F-12 1:1 (v/v) nutrient mixture (Gibco,
BRL Life Technologies, Gaithersburg, MD), containing 1%
fetal calf serum (Biological Industries, Beit Ha’emek). Cells
were incubated for 6 h to determine steroid production
before spontaneous luteinization; a previous study in our
laboratory had indicated that granulosa cells maintained
aromatase activity after 6 h of incubation (R. Meidan and D.
Wolfenson, unpublished). Cells were incubated at 38°C
under 5% CO2. Granulosa cells were incubated in medium
only or with the addition of testosterone (300 ng ml–1;
Sigma, St Louis, MO). Thecal cells that had been isolated
from preovulatory follicles were incubated in medium only
or with the addition of forskolin (10 μmol l–1; Sigma) or LH
(50 ng ml–1; USDA bLH-B-5, provided through the USDA
Animal Hormone Program, Beltsville, MD). Thecal cells
that had been isolated from medium-sized follicles were
incubated in medium only or with forskolin (but not with
LH, for technical reasons). Three replicate wells were used
for each treatment. At the end of incubation, media were
collected from all wells and stored separately at –20°C for
determination of steroid concentrations.

Hormone analyses

Plasma samples were extracted with diethyl ether as
described by Badinga et al. (1992). Concentrations of
oestradiol, androstenedione and progesterone in follicular
fluid and medium, as well as the concentrations of
progesterone in extracted plasma, were determined by
radioimmunoassay described by Badinga et al. (1992) that
had been validated in our laboratory (Shaham-Albalancy
et al., 1997; Roth et al., 2000a). Assay sensitivity was 0.5 pg
ml–1, and the intra- and interassay coefficients of variation
were 3 and 5%, respectively.

Statistical analysis

The General Linear Models procedure of the Statistical
Analysis System was used (SAS, 1987). Data relating to
follicular characteristics and hormonal concentrations in
the follicular fluid and media were analysed by one-way
ANOVA, separately for each type of follicle and cell. The
data of steroid hormone concentrations in the media of the
three replicate wells for each treatment were averaged, and
were analysed separately for basal and stimulated oestradiol
and androstenedione production. Concentrations of steroid
hormones in the media were expressed as ng per 105
viable cells. The statistical model for concentration of hormones in
plasma included effects of treatment (control versus heat
stress groups), cow (within treatment), day of oestrous cycle,
and treatment by day interaction. Data are presented as
mean ± SE.

Results

Body temperatures of heat-stressed cows increased
gradually to a maximum of 40.7°C, which is a level that is
maintained by high milk-yielding cows under natural
conditions during hot summer months. Control cows
maintained normothermia (body temperature of 38.7°C).

Experiment 1: delayed effect of heat stress on medium-
sized follicles

On the day of examination (day 3 of the subsequent
cycle) in both control and heat-stressed cows, a mean of
one medium-sized follicle per cow was recognized as a
follicle from the preceding cycle. These follicles had not
been dissected. The number of medium-sized follicles that
had emerged during the first follicular wave of the
subsequent cycle was similar in control and heat-stressed
cows (Table 1). More healthy medium-sized follicles were
counted in control cows than in heat-stressed cows (56 and
38% of total follicles, respectively), but this difference was
not significant. Healthy medium-sized follicles in control
and heat-stressed cows did not differ in terms of follicular
diameter, follicular fluid volume or number and viability of
thecal and granulosa cells (Table 1). The concentration of
progesterone in the follicular fluid was higher in heat-
stressed cows than in control cows (P < 0.05; Table 2).
Androstenedione and oestradiol concentrations in follicular
fluid did not differ between groups. As expected, the
oestradiol:progesterone concentration ratio and the
oestradiol:androstenedione concentration ratio in the

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The delayed effect of heat stress on follicular steroidogenesis was observed in both medium-sized and previously heat-stressed cows (Table 4). The concentration of androstenedione in the follicular fluid was lower in heat-stressed cows than in control cows ($P < 0.05$). LH-stimulated androstenedione production was lower in thecal cells obtained from previously heat-stressed cows than in those from control cows (Fig. 2; $P < 0.05$). Forskolin-stimulated androstenedione production, although decreased, was not affected significantly by heat exposure. Oestradiol production by granulosa cells did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows in either the absence or the presence of testosterone (Fig. 2). Basal progesterone production by granulosa cells did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows (2.3 ± 1.2 versus 4.4 ± 1.1 ng per 10$^5$ cells, respectively). Basal, forskolin- or LH-stimulated production of progesterone by thecal cells (0.4 ± 0.1, 2.7 ± 0.5 and 3.3 ± 0.9 versus 0.3 ± 0.1, 2.5 ± 0.5 and 3.7 ± 0.8 ng per 10$^5$ cells, respectively) also did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows. The concentrations of progesterone and oestradiol in plasma did not differ between control and heat-stressed cows during heat exposure (days 2–6: 0.6 ± 0.2 versus 0.9 ± 0.3 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 1.3 ± 0.5 versus 1.5 ± 0.3 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively), after heat exposure (days 7–19 of the treated cycle: 1.7 ± 0.4 versus 1.5 ± 0.4 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 1.9 ± 0.6 and 1.6 ± 0.4 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively) and after the subsequent cycle (days 0–3: 0.06 ± 0.03 versus 0.08 ± 0.03 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 2.8 ± 0.9 versus 2.6 ± 1.1 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively).

**Experiment 2: delayed effect of heat stress on preovulatory follicles**

The diameter, volume of follicular fluid, total number of granulosa cells and viability of thecal cells of the preovulatory follicles, collected on day 9 of the subsequent cycle, did not differ between control and previously heat-stressed cows (Table 3). However, the viability of granulosa cells was lower ($P < 0.05$) in heat-stressed cows than in control cows. The similarly high concentrations of oestradiol (> 550 ng ml$^{-1}$), together with the oestradiol: progesterone and oestradiol:androstenedione concentration ratios > 1 in the follicular fluid (Table 4), indicate that the follicles examined in both groups were oestrogenically active preovulatory follicles. The concentration of androstenedione in the follicular fluid was lower in heat-stressed cows than in control cows ($P < 0.05$). LH-stimulated androstenedione production was lower in thecal cells obtained from previously heat-stressed cows than in those from control cows (Fig. 2; $P < 0.05$). Forskolin-stimulated androstenedione production, although decreased, was not affected significantly by heat exposure. Oestradiol production by granulosa cells did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows in either the absence or the presence of testosterone (Fig. 2). Basal progesterone production by granulosa cells did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows (2.3 ± 1.2 versus 4.4 ± 1.1 ng per 10$^5$ cells, respectively). Basal, forskolin- or LH-stimulated production of progesterone by thecal cells (0.4 ± 0.1, 2.7 ± 0.5 and 3.3 ± 0.9 versus 0.3 ± 0.1, 2.5 ± 0.5 and 3.7 ± 0.8 ng per 10$^5$ cells, respectively) also did not differ between previously heat-stressed and control cows. The concentrations of progesterone and oestradiol in plasma did not differ between control and heat-stressed groups during heat exposure (days 2–6: 1.8 ± 0.9 versus 0.7 ± 0.9 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 1.4 ± 0.2 versus 1.6 ± 0.3 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively), after heat exposure (days 7–19 of the treated cycle: 2.4 ± 0.7 versus 3.8 ± 0.7 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 1.4 ± 0.2 versus 1.4 ± 0.2 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively) and during the subsequent cycle (days 0–7: 0.4 ± 0.2 versus 0.6 ± 0.1 ng progesterone ml$^{-1}$ and 2.6 ± 0.3 versus 2.7 ± 0.4 pg oestradiol ml$^{-1}$ in control and heat-stressed cows, respectively).

**Discussion**

The present study provides, for the first time, evidence for a delayed effect of heat stress on follicular steroidogenesis. The delayed effect was detected in both medium-sized and preovulatory follicles, but was expressed differently in granulosa and thecal cells within each class of follicles.

Two experiments were performed during the winter to avoid any potential seasonal carry-over effects from the other studies.
previous summer. In addition, the experimental design, in which heat-stressed cows were compared with contemporay control cows, enabled the acute heat exposure to be associated with alterations in follicular function in medium-sized and preovulatory follicles, 20 and 26 days later, respectively. It might be expected that during the processes of development and selection, the healthiest follicle from the cohort of impaired medium-sized follicles would be selected to become the dominant follicle. However, alterations in follicular function were also found in preovulatory follicles from previously heat-stressed cows. Calculations made according to Lussier et al. (1987) showed that the medium-sized or preovulatory follicles studied (7.7 mm or 15.2 mm in diameter, respectively) had diameters of about 0.5–1.0 mm when the cows were heat-stressed. Follicles in such an early stage of follicular growth are characterized by a high mitotic index of granulosa cells (Lussier et al., 1987) and might be particularly sensitive to environmental changes. It remains to be determined whether very small antral (< 0.5 mm in diameter) or pre-antral follicles are also susceptible to heat stress.

In terms of steroid production, the thecal cells were found to be more susceptible than granulosa cells to heat stress, and expressed a delayed effect of heat stress in both classes of follicle. The consistent decrease in androstenedione production in both medium-sized and preovulatory follicles in previously heat-stressed cows correlated with the decreased concentrations of androstenedione in their follicular fluid. This delayed effect of heat stress on

### Table 3. Characteristics of preovulatory follicles of control and previously heat-stressed cows at day 26 after heat exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Heat-stressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of cows (one follicle per cow)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diameter (mm)</td>
<td>18.2 ± 1.4</td>
<td>15.2 ± 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follicular fluid volume (ml)</td>
<td>2.6 ± 0.4</td>
<td>2.4 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of granulosa cells × 10⁶ per follicles</td>
<td>12.3 ± 2.3</td>
<td>14.6 ± 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability of granulosa cells (%)</td>
<td>42.0 ± 4.9</td>
<td>25.0 ± 5.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability of thecal cells (%)</td>
<td>&gt; 90</td>
<td>&gt; 90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean ± se. *Significantly different from control group (P < 0.05).
androstenedione production by thecal cells indicates strongly that the marked decrease in androstenedione production by dominant follicles observed in the autumn (Wolfenson et al., 1997) was due to previous exposure of cows to summer heat stress. It has been shown that early atresia of bovine follicles is characterized by a decrease in androgen production by thecal cells (McNatty et al., 1984). Thus, the above findings may indicate that both classes of follicle obtained from previously heat-stressed cows had been in an early stage of atresia. Early atresia in medium-sized follicles could also be associated with low oestradiol production by granulosa cells and increased progesterone concentrations in the follicular fluid of heat-stressed cows. Unlike the effect on thecal cells, the decreased production of oestradiol by granulosa cells that was noted in medium-sized follicles after heat stress was not carried over to the preovulatory stage. Nevertheless, the delayed effect of heat stress on granulosa cells in preovulatory follicles was expressed in terms of a significant decrease of cell viability. The reason for the different responses of the two cell types to heat stress within each of the two follicular stages, or between the two stages, is not clear. It could be related to the fact that granulosa cells acquire the steroidogenic capacity at a later stage during follicular growth than do thecal cells (Bao and Garverick, 1998).

The mechanism by which heat stress induces a decrease in androstenedione production in thecal cells is not clear. Recent analyses of mRNA content for LH receptor in thecal cells obtained from preovulatory follicles did not provide any evidence for alterations of mRNA content related to previous heat exposure (Roth et al., 2000b). However, the significant decrease of LH-stimulated, but not of forskolin-stimulated, androstenedione production by thecal cells noted in the present study may indicate that heat exposure induced impairment of LH receptor function. Nevertheless, lack of steroid precursor or compromise of other cell function should be considered. Although a possible delayed effect of heat exposure on LH secretion was not examined in the present study, its involvement in the attenuated androgen production cannot be ruled out. Seasonal studies that might have shed some light on this subject provided conflicting results regarding plasma LH concentrations after summer heat stress (Crister et al., 1983; Day et al., 1986; Badinga et al., 1994). Moreover, the specificity of heat-stress as the environmental factor responsible for the seasonal variations in LH secretion has not been examined.

In the present study, the oestradiol content of the follicular fluid of preovulatory follicles was not affected by a previous exposure to acute heat stress. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Ambrose et al. (1999). Comparison of the present findings concerning steroid concentrations in the follicular fluid with those of previous seasonal studies (Badinga et al., 1993; Wolfenson et al., 1997) indicates that a decrease in oestradiol concentration in the follicular fluid may depend on the duration and severity of the thermal stress to which cows are exposed. Decrease of oestradiol concentration in the follicular fluid is more likely to occur after exposure to long-term, chronic (summer) heat stress than to acute heat stress as in the present study. This response would be consistent with the finding that after chronic summer heat stress an eight times decrease in androgen production by thecal cells in the autumn was accompanied by a significant decrease in oestradiol concentration in the follicular fluid (Wolfenson et al., 1997). However, a 5 day acute heat stress (present study) induced a three times decrease in androgen production, which was probably not enough to elicit a decrease in oestradiol concentration in the follicular fluid. In addition, the oestradiol content in the follicular fluid reflects the balance between production of the hormone by the cells and its clearance from the follicle to the circulation. Thus, the discrepancy between steroid production and hormonal follicular fluid content found in the present study could be related to heat-stress-induced alteration in vascular responses. Hyperthermia has been shown to decrease ovarian blood flow (Lublin and Wolfenson, 1996) and to inhibit angiogenesis (Fajardo et al., 1988). Blood flow and vascular density determine the follicular perfusion rate, which directly influences the rates of nutrient uptake and hormonal release by the follicle. The relationships among heat stress, vascularity and steroidogenic capacity require further investigation.

In conclusion, exposure of cows to heat stress resulted in impaired steroidogenesis 20 and 26 days later, in medium-sized and preovulatory follicles, respectively. The delayed effect was expressed in a different way in granulosa and thecal cells within each class of follicles. Granulosa cells expressed low oestradiol production in medium-sized follicles and low viability in the preovulatory follicles. In terms of steroid production, thecal cells appeared to be consistently susceptible to heat stress and expressed a carry-over effect on androgen production in both types of follicle. Delayed effects of heat stress on follicular steroidogenic capacity, together with its delayed effects on follicular dynamics (Roth et al., 2000a), as well as on oocyte quality and embryo development (Roth et al., 1999), could be responsible for the low fertility of dairy cows during the autumn.

### Table 4. Steroid concentrations in the follicular fluid of preovulatory follicles of control and previously heat-stressed cows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steroid</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Heat-stressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oestradiol (ng ml⁻¹)</td>
<td>600 ± 122</td>
<td>560 ± 136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progesterone (ng ml⁻¹)</td>
<td>22.3 ± 4.0</td>
<td>12.9 ± 3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androstenedione (ng ml⁻¹)</td>
<td>10.2 ± 1.6</td>
<td>4.8 ± 1.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oestradiol:progesterone ratio</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oestradiol:androstenedione ratio</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>116.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean ± SE (control: n = 5; heat-stressed: n = 4).

*Significantly different from control group (P < 0.05).
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