



Sperm morphology in progeny-tested Swedish AI dairy bull sires

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for International Students
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The present thesis is a partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Science Degree in Veterinary Medicine for International Students (MSc), at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), in the field of **Animal Reproduction**

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To my parents (Associate Professor Khalaf Al-makhzoomi and Mona Sulieman), brothers (Alla and Mohammad), sisters (Assistant Professor Ibtihal, Batool and Afya) and my sweet lovely wife (Faten Al-Yabroudi) ...

ABSTRACT

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Use of bull semen with high levels of sperm abnormalities, reflecting genital dysfunction, is not recommendable to use for AI since it most likely leads to sub-fertility. If sperm morphology deteriorates with age, it becomes a source of concern when using ageing progeny-tested AI-bull sires. However, whether a relationship between sperm morphology and fertility after AI in progeny-tested bull sires is present remains to be proven and constituted the reason for a retrospective study of progeny-tested bull sires of the Swedish Red and White (SRB) and Swedish Holstein (SLB) breeds performed with data of 8 SRB and 4 SLB sires analysed in an University specialized andrological laboratory. Particular attention was paid to the influence of age and breed as well as the variation between- and within-bull for presence and level of sperm abnormalities. Sperm morphology differed between sires, ejaculates and breed, with 6/12 sires having ejaculates with more than 10% of morphologically deviating sperm heads, an used threshold for young AI bulls. However, with the exception of pear-shaped or narrow at the base anomalies, individual defect mean values were always within what is expected for a bull sire, and considered within acceptable limits. Breed and bull within breed age affected some semen (ejaculate volume) and most sperm morphology variables, while age significantly affected only few sperm morphology variables (nuclear pouches and sperm head contour). Estimated breeding values for male fertility output differed significantly among bulls and, when all ejaculates were accounted for, the percentage of morphologically normal spermatozoa was positively related to fertility. Few individual sperm abnormalities in all ejaculates correlated significantly to fertility, as pear-shaped sperm heads. When separated by breed, these correlations were restricted, in SRB bulls, to the normal spermatozoa in wet smears, or lost in SLB bulls, probably owing to the reduced sire material examined. In conclusion, the presence of some relationships between sperm morphology and fertility after AI calls for routine, frequently done assessments of sperm morphology in AI-stud bull sires during their entire active life.

Key words: sperm abnormalities, NRR, fertility estimates, SRB, SLB, bull.

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Contents

Background, 9

Artificial insemination in dairy cattle, 9

Historical summary, 9

Testing of bull sires, 11

Assessment of semen quality and its relation to fertility, 12

Introduction to the research report, 15

Aim of the study, 16

Research report, 17

Sperm morphology and fertility of progeny-tested AI Swedish dairy bulls, by Makhzoomi A, Lundeheim N, Håård M & Rodríguez-Martínez H

General conclusions, 35

Future prospects, 36

General references, 37

Acknowledgements, 40

Background

Artificial insemination in dairy cattle

Artificial Insemination (AI), the manual deposition of spermatozoa in the reproductive tract of a sexually receptive female by the use of artificial means, is considered the first reproductive biotechnology. Created with the major intention of controlling the dissemination of venereal diseases, AI still remains as the most important technology for safe gene dispersion in livestock breeding (Vishwanath, 2003). The AI-technology has also provided impetus for developing other assisted reproduction techniques such as cryopreservation of semen, sperm sexing, as well as alternative methods for semen deposition, oestrous cycle regulation and control. Artificial insemination has also maintained association with embryo transfer (Foote, 2002).

Artificial insemination has facilitated the choice of using the best possible bulls of proven quality in improving the genetic make up of the cattle population thus conveying to the primary goal for breeding; to increase the productivity and the profitability of a particular commercial herd by increasing the number of offspring produced by selected genetically superior bulls. The use of AI made also possible to measure the performance of large numbers of progenies born after AI of many females using sperm doses from a single bull, thus allowing the accurate selection of bulls with desirable characters.

Historical summary

Artificial Insemination has been anecdotically described as firstly performed as early as the 14th century by an Arabic horse breeder, who transferred the contents of an ejaculate from the vagina of a recently served mare into the vagina of another mare by means of a sponge. The first documented AI is not that old, performed by the Italian abbot and researcher Spallanzani who, in 1784, artificially inseminated a female dog which whelped three pups 62 days later (Foote, 2002). Spallanzani filtered the semen later on and found that only the remained sperm fraction of the ejaculate, and not the filtrate, could cause the fertilization (Foote, 1999).

In 1899, Ivanov developed the first organized AI research studies in Russia, developing semen extenders and training technicians for the selection of superior stallions and the development of AI to multiply their breeding outcome (Foote, 1999). By using AI, Ivanov and his co-workers hoped to restrict the spread of venereal diseases of cattle, the most relevant rationale for the use of this technology, in veterinary terms. In 1914, Amantea developed the first artificial vagina for the use in dogs (Perry, 1968). This work served as a model for the Russian development of artificial vaginas for bulls (Foote, 2002). Later, in 1931, the state farms started to use AI, thus exponentially increasing its use in livestock breeding (Rodin and Lipatov, 1936). In Japan, AI began as a new technique in 1912 after the successful studies of Ishikawa with Ivanov, contributing to the spreading of the technology (Nishikawa, 1962). In 1937, cattle AI became a

practical commercial scheme when Sorensen, a Danish Veterinarian who was familiar with the Russian AI-programmes, developed the first cooperative dairy AI organization in Denmark (Sorensen, 1938). His successful achievements were important stimuli for the development of AI in dairy cattle in the USA (1938) and other western countries (Perry 1968; Foote, 2002). Meanwhile, the Danish Veterinarians established the procedure of recto-vaginal fixation of the cervix; a praxis still used today for intrauterine AI, that increased fertility with a reduced sperm number and made -eventually- possible the use of frozen-thawed semen.

The development of an egg yolk-phosphate semen extender for liquid semen stored for some days was the first major improvement enhancing AI (Phillips and Lardy, 1940), being followed by Salisbury et al. (1941) who buffered the extender with sodium citrate (Foote, 2002). A major breakthrough was the discovery (by fortunate chance) that chicken spermatozoa could be effectively frozen and thawed by the addition of glycerol as cryoprotectant (Polge et al., 1949). The addition of glycerol to the original yolk-citrate extender, increased fertility by 15% units, since spermatozoa could then be protected from cold shock (Foote and Bratton, 1949). Another major breakthrough was the control of venereal diseases by the routinary addition of antibiotics to the extender (Almquist et al., 1949; Foote and Bratton, 1950).

In the early 1950s, powerful tools for progeny testing were developed by Henderson and Robertson (cf Van Vleck, 1981). Few years later and for the first time, frozen semen was routinely used by a Canadian organization (Waterloo), followed by the American Breeders Service in 1957, which improved the liquid nitrogen tanks and service for frozen semen. In 1963, the Tris-buffered egg yolk – glycerol extender was developed which provided excellent protection for the spermatozoa either frozen or unfrozen (Davis et al., 1963; Foote, 1998). This modified extender became the most commonly used medium for cryopreservation of the semen of most species (Iritani, 1980). In 1964, Cassou modified the system originally developed by Sorensen (1940), with a method used for sealing plastic straws and a gun for insemination (Pickett and Berndtson, 1974). During the past 40 years, the development and application of cattle AI with preserved semen have been growing exponentially and on a global scale, with more than 100 million of first AIs in the world using frozen semen (Thibier and Wagner, 2000).

The initiation of AI in Denmark in the early 1930s by Sorensen, encouraged Swedish researchers to focus on the remarkable value of such technique in eradicating venereal diseases and contributing to cattle health management. By 1935, two members from the Animal Breeding Institute at Wiad; Kåre Backström; a biologist and Gert Bonnier; a professor in animal breeding, made study tours to Denmark and Russia. Their enthusiasm for the potential value of AI along with the help of specialist Veterinarians, such as Allan Bane; at the Institute of Animal Breeding, resulted in the establishment of training programs on this new field in 1942. In the year after, the first farmer-driven AI associations were founded in Scania (Swensson, 1993). Soon, knowledge of this new technology rapidly expanded into cattle breeding through agricultural organizations, agricultural publications and local press. The first National Organization of AI Co-operatives

(RSS) was founded in 1944, helping the AI societies in designing breeding plans, financial matters, equipment, terms of employment for the staff and training of technicians. In 1946, Professor Nils Lagerlöf established training programs in AI, expanding the application of this technique to include not only veterinarians but also field-technicians. In 1947, nineteen A.I centers were established with 89,728 AIs being applied (Swensson, 1993). By 1950, testing and development of different extenders in order to prolong semen durability was soon followed by implantation of deep-freezing of semen, first in glass ampoules, then in medium-payettes and mini-Payettes (0.25 mL) the latter dominating since 1971. Until the year 2000, 90% of the dairy cows and heifers were solely bred by AI, a figure that is still maintained at present, among the approx 300,000 dairy females being artificially inseminated in Sweden.

Testing of bull sires

In Sweden, a group of approximately 200 young bulls (2/3 SRB) are taken into Svensk Avel ek. för.; a nationally dominating AI enterprise own by farmer organisations, after being raised in a rearing station until the age of approx 11-12 months where they follow a testing based on conformation and growth rate. These young bulls were recruited as calves (among a total number of 400-500 calves), based on the genetic value of their ancestors (particularly conformation, production, growth and health), tested for specific diseases, and clinically surveyed. Semen is collected from these young bulls and, following an immediate control of semen quality mainly based on volume, concentration and sperm motility, the semen is challenged for its ability to be cryopreserved using a single set up for handling and freezing/thawing procedures. Those bulls whose semen lies within normal parameters and sustains these procedures for freezing and thawing is then used to inseminate cows and heifers in herds all over the country, based on a scheme where members of the farmers organisation comply with by allowing AI of a certain percentage of their herd with semen from these unproven young bulls. The results of the AIs are collected as non-return-rates (NRR, e. g. the percentage of cows not returning to oestrus at some, most often 56 day, interval post-AI). Since such estimates of fertility are under the influence of several factors (season, inseminator, area, category of female etc) that can overestimate its outcome, NRRs are statistically corrected for the influence of these factors and called adjusted values or estimated breeding values. In average, the AIs by semen from a given sire result in a daughter group of 150 females per tested bull. This female progeny, of those sires that attain an acceptable fertility level, is thereafter monitored during their first lactation and the resulting analyses provide production data that is accumulated during the waiting period of progeny testing. The accumulated data is used to select genetically superior bulls for return to AI service and be maintained for regular production of commercial semen and to become parents of the next generation of females. A small proportion of these proven bulls are also used to sire the next bulls to be progeny-tested. After progeny testing, only a small percentage (approx. 5%, with variation between years) of the progeny tested bulls are selected as proven bull sires.

Assessment of semen quality and its relation to fertility

At Svensk Avel, a young unproven bull should produce semen with a total sperm number of $\geq 2.5 \times 10^9$ per ejaculate and have $\geq 65\%$ of spermatozoa depicting progressive rectilinear motility to be considered for freezing. If screened further, such semen should also have $>90\%$ of the total number of spermatozoa depicting morphologically normal sperm head shape, $<5\%$ of morphologically immature spermatozoa (e.g. having proximal cytoplasmic droplets) and $<10\%$ of sperm tail abnormalities. Furthermore, it should contain neither inflammatory cells nor rich amounts of other foreign cells. Within such a range the semen would be declared as having a normal semen picture as the expression of normal testicular production, normal epididymal sperm maturation and normal function of the accessory sexual glands. The sire should, if found able to mount and showing a normal libido, be apt for reproduction and potentially fertile.

Decades ago, AI doses contained 30 million spermatozoa. Figures of 7.5-10 million spermatozoa/dose are much more common nowadays (Den Daas et al., 1998; Håård and Håård, 2000). Such decrease in the total number of spermatozoa/dose are a consequence of gained knowledge in the methods to handle and freeze/thaw semen as well the fact that spermatozoa from some bulls can still maintain acceptable fertility post-AI at high-extension rates, while others can not. This means that for each bull, there is a certain number of spermatozoa that will maintain viability at thawing and, consequently, present a minimal limit per dose, warranting the expression of a certain level of individual fertility. For proven bulls, the range of viable spermatozoa per AI-dose calculated as needed to obtain 95% of maximal conception varies between 1 and 11 million spermatozoa (Den Daas et al., 1998).

When frozen-thawed semen is used for AI, the apparent fertility of the majority of sires follows a dose response curve in relation to the total number of viable, normal spermatozoa. Such a curve reaches an individual plateau of maximal fertility (usually below 100%) after showing a marked increase that also follows a different slope for each individual animal (Pace et al., 1981; Umland, 1984). There is a statistically significant relationship between the total number of viable spermatozoa inseminated and the fertility post-AI, following linearly the fertility level for each sire (Den Daas et al., 1998, Schwartz et al., 1981; Shannon and Vishwanath, 1995). This means that the insemination of additional spermatozoa from a sub-fertile bull would not necessarily result in better fertility than the one originally shown by the sire (Pace et al., 1981; Den Daas et al., 1998). For this reason, AI semen producers conduct nowadays dose-response curves for sperm numbers in the AI-dose for each sire, in order to determine the doses that warrant their maximal fertility (usually between 5 and 20 million spermatozoa).

The above results coincide with the concept presented by Saacke et al. (1998); sperm characteristics whose deficiencies are reflected in reduced gestation rates can be categorized as compensable or not compensable. Those that are compensable are relevant for sperm transport, including the interaction with the female genital tract and the vestments of the oocyte (includes sperm viability, motility and some morphological features), while those named uncompensable are

relevant to maintain the processes of fertilization and early embryo development (morphology, genomic integrity and intactness of the centriole, for instance). Increasing the number of spermatozoa in the AI-dose can only compensate for the first category. However, when maximal fertility is reached (see below), increasing the sperm number has no effect, and the differences in fertility among males are then considered as being determined by the non-compensable attributes of the spermatozoa (Saacke et al., 2000).

Sperm motility is the parameter most frequently used to measure sperm viability in the ejaculate and during the process of cryopreservation, and although it has been related to fertility, the correlations varied largely among studies, from highly related to poor correlations (Kjaestad et al., 1993; Stålhammar et al., 1994; Bailey et al., 1994). Using computerized equipments (CASA), the analyses of standardized semen samples from bulls have shown that certain patterns of post-thaw motility, such as linearity, correlate significantly with field fertility ($r^2 = 0.45-0.63$, Zhang et al., 1998; Januskauskas et al., 2001; 2003). Even stronger correlations could be found when various motility patterns were combined statistically with other parameters of sperm function ($r^2 = 0.68-0.98$, Farrell et al., 1998; Januskauskas et al., 2001) in AI-bulls. Motility depends on the ability of spermatozoa to produce and consume ATP. The ATP contents can be measured by luminometry (Söderquist, 1991) but neither the ATP contents nor the quantitation of viable sperm numbers, as indirectly determined by ATP, seem to correlate with fertility post-AI (Januskauskas et al., 1996). Spermatozoa can not live nor interact with the female tract or the oocyte without an intact plasma membrane. Therefore, evaluation of the sperm plasma membrane integrity has been one of the parameters most studied lately, either morphologically (in stained or wet smears, using light microscopy), using specific fluorescent probes (and analyses of microscopy or flow cytometry) or incubations in hypo-osmotic solutions (for review, see Rodriguez-Martinez et al., 1998). Analyses of membrane integrity that screen large numbers of spermatozoa yield significant correlations to fertility (Ericsson et al., 1993; Januskauskas et al., 2001). The intactness of the acrosome, either assessed morphologically or by fluorescent probes has been statistically related to the fertility of frozen-thawed semen (Graham et al., 1990; Januskauskas et al., 2000a, b).

The evaluation of the degree of denaturalization of the DNA using flow cytometry (the so-called "Sperm Chromatin Structure Assay", SCSA, [Evenson et al., 1980; 1982]), a method that measures the degree of increment of structural heterogeneity of the sperm chromatin, has been associated to fertility (Ballachey et al, 1998; Evenson and Jost 2000; Januskauskas et al., 2001; 2003) and appears as a valuable complement to the microscopic assessment of sperm morphology (Evenson, 1999) to measure disturbances of the spermatogenesis that could cause morphological deviations in the morphology of the sperm head.

The evaluation of sperm morphology is an important component of the spermogramme and therefore of the andrological evaluation. Sperm morphology indicates normality or eventual deviations of the spermatogenesis and sperm maturation in the epididymis and its results, correctly assessed, are used to cull males with semen of low quality for AI when these suggest major genital

pathologies (Lagerlöf, 1934; Söderquist, 1991). Unfortunately, when the morphological parameters are within acceptable limits, the morphology of the sample does not, *per se*, provides enough information to judge the expected level of fertility of the semen post-AI. This is independent of a subjective assessment (Zhang et al 1998) or the use of computer-based equipment (ASMA, Gravance et al., 1999; Boersma et al., 2000), since, in many cases, a high sperm number in the dose is able to compensate, at least partially, a high percentage of morphological abnormalities (Saacke et al., 1998). This is especially clear for the bull, where the degree of selection for sperm quality (including morphology) has determined that the incidence of sperm abnormalities in bulls of similar age has decreased substantially within 30 years (compare Hultnäs, 1959 with Söderquist et al., 1991). Bull spermatozoa with certain sperm head morphological deviations (such as those with nuclear pouches in heads with normal contour) do sometimes reach the oocyte (Saacke et al 1998), but not in all cases (Thundathil et al., 1998). In any case, they are related to lower fertilization rates and embryo development (Thundathil et al., 1998). Other defects, such as the “knobbed acrosome”, prevents the union of sperm-ZP (Thundathil et al., 2000), while others (pyriform sperm heads) have a reduced capacity to bind and penetrate the ZP *in vitro*, and the resulting zygotes cleave abnormally (Thundathil et al., 1999). There is, however, a relationship between sperm morphometry (bull semen) and the normal structure of the chromatin (the latter in direct relation to fertility; see above, Sailer et al., 1996). Recently, the percentage of morphologically normal spermatozoa has been identified as a parameter statistically related ($r= 0.54$) to field fertility (corrected conception rates, Phillips et al., 2000).

Sperm quality has been found as differing with the age of the sires (Almquist and Amann, 1976; Saeed et al., 1989). Considering that AI-dairy bulls are tested for fertility at an early age (usually 11-13 months of age) thresholds for sperm normality in terms of sperm morphology has been studied and set for this age-interval (Söderquist et al., 1991). Most often, this setting is also used for bulls of an older age, including progeny-tested bulls. Recently, Hallap et al. (2004) has studied sperm morphology post-thaw in bulls when young (11-13 months of age) as well as while these were awaiting progeny testing (4 years of age), finding that while sperm motility and membrane integrity improved when sires were older, sperm morphology did not reveal any significant changes with age. Since this study was done on frozen-thawed samples, it remains to be determined whether age influences sperm morphology in ejaculated, not-processed semen of progeny-tested bulls.

Introduction to the research report

Dairy bulls providing semen for AI are tested for fertility at an early age (usually 11-13 months of age). Sperm morphology thresholds for normality have been studied and set for this age-interval (Söderquist et al., 1991), a setting that is routinely also used for bulls of an older age, including progeny-tested bulls. Since some data indicate that sperm quality differs with the age of the sires, it may be assumed that such changes could indeed affect the morphology of the spermatozoa and even the fertility of the sires. Such assumption is based on the fact that the genital normality of these bulls could have changed over time and this would affect the quality of the semen they produce. Therefore, there a logical need to determine which levels of sperm abnormalities are present in progeny-tested bulls, with the aim of setting proper thresholds and also to find out if these levels of abnormalities could be related to the fertility of the proven sires.

Aim of the study

The overall aim of the study was to increase our knowledge about the relationship between the overall level of sperm abnormalities in the semen of progeny-tested dairy bull sires of the Swedish Red and White (SRB) and Swedish Holstein (SLB) breeds to be used for the production of frozen doses for artificial insemination (AI) and their fertility after AI. As well, it aimed to determine the variation in sperm morphology within bull and the influence of age and breed on the outcomes. The hypothesis tested was that fertility after AI is dependent on the morphology of the spermatozoa to be cryopreserved and used for AI.

Research Report

Sperm morphology and fertility of progeny-tested AI Swedish dairy bulls

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Abstract

Use of bull semen with high levels of sperm abnormalities, reflecting genital dysfunction, is not recommendable to use for AI since it most likely leads to sub-fertility. If sperm morphology deteriorates with age, it becomes a source of concern when using ageing progeny-tested AI-bull sires. However, whether a relationship between sperm morphology and fertility after AI in progeny-tested bull sires is present remains to be proven and constituted the reason for a retrospective study of progeny-tested bull sires of the Swedish Red and White (SRB) and Swedish Holstein (SLB) breeds performed with data of 8 SRB and 4 SLB sires analysed in an University specialized andrological laboratory. Particular attention was paid to the influence of age and breed as well as the variation between- and within-bull for presence and level of sperm abnormalities. Sperm morphology differed between sires, ejaculates and breed, with 6/12 sires having ejaculates with more than 10% of morphologically deviating sperm heads, an used threshold for young AI bulls. However, with the exception of pear-shaped or narrow at the base anomalies, individual defect mean values were always within what is expected for a bull sire, and considered within acceptable limits. Breed and bull within breed age affected some semen (ejaculate volume) and most sperm morphology variables, while age significantly affected only few sperm morphology variables (nuclear pouches and sperm head contour). Estimated breeding values for male fertility output differed significantly among bulls and, when all ejaculates were accounted for, the percentage of morphologically normal spermatozoa was positively related to fertility. Few individual sperm abnormalities in all ejaculates correlated significantly to fertility, as pear-shaped sperm heads. When separated by breed, these correlations were restricted, in SRB bulls, to the normal spermatozoa in wet smears, or lost in SLB bulls, probably owing to the reduced sire material examined. In conclusion, the presence of some relationships between sperm morphology and fertility after AI calls for routine, frequently done assessments of sperm morphology in AI-stud bull sires during their entire active life.

Short title: Sperm morphology in progeny tested AI sires

Key words: sperm abnormalities, NRR, fertility estimates, SRB, SLB, bull.

Introduction

Artificial insemination (AI) has been the reproductive biotechnology that has made possible the safe use of semen from selected sires on a breeding female population, thus preventing the dissemination of venereal diseases. Furthermore, application of AI as a tool for dissemination of semen from sires with characters of importance has contributed to the improvement of the genetic quality of breeding herds. This improvement has been exponential in dairy cattle where use of frozen semen for AI is most common, providing possibilities for the commercial dissemination of genetic material all over the world (Thibier & Wagner, 2000). A pre-requisite for the best use of this genetic material is to obtain acceptable fertility after AI. For this reason, both screening of the normality of the semen and the correct evaluation of bull fertility are essential to the AI industry.

At present, the most common means for estimating bull fertility are non-return rates (NRRs), i.e. the percentage of cows not returning to oestrus at some (most often 56 days) interval post-AI. The 56d-NRR is indirect but rapid and it is therefore used most often when a population of females is under a certain degree of control, for instance when cows are enrolled in a milk-recording programme. However, such rates are under the influence of several factors that can overestimate the outcome. Examples of these factors are the reliability of the oestrus control systems, the season of the year, the category of the females inseminated, the area, the inseminator, etc. Non-return rates are therefore often statistically corrected for the influence of these factors and thus named “corrected” NRRs, or estimated breeding value (Stålhammar et al., 1994).

In most breeding programmes, semen from young bulls is collected, tested for normality and thereafter processed to produce AI-doses which are inseminated on a proportion of the breeding population to determine its fertility and lay the basis for the progeny testing procedure. The progeny testing is a procedure that takes 3-4 years and includes analyses of the collected data using a Best Linear Unbiased Prediction (BLUP) system, a procedure that estimates breeding values of a sire based on the phenotypic performance of himself and his daughters (Werf, 2000). During this 3-4 year waiting period, the bulls are reared indoors, in groups of 8-12 sires at the bull station. Once the results of the progeny testing, based on the results from their daughters’ first lactation are known, the top-ranked bulls return to the semen production scheme and are used as proven sires (élite bulls). Under these circumstances, a progeny tested bull has reached the age of 4.5 to 5 years, and qualitative and/or quantitative changes could have occurred in his semen so that the fertility level assessed from 56d-NRR when the bull was young may no longer be valid.

Current semen (ejaculate) evaluation is done immediately after collection and comprises the determination of aspect, volume (also by weight) and sperm concentration. As well, the subjective assessment of sperm motility and obvious deviations in sperm morphology (bent tails, proximal droplets etc) are done pertaining the indirect measure of sperm viability and normality prior to

processing. Motility assessments are also routine post-thaw, with thresholds for use or refusal of the processed semen.

Seldom -rather than often- the semen of the sires is assessed for sperm morphology, an evaluation being done when suspicion of pathologies that could compromise sperm production or function exist. The presence of a large number of sperm abnormalities in the semen is not only indicative of pathological processes in the testes, epididymides or accessory sexual glands (Lagerlöf, 1934), but also associated with a decreased fertility of the semen (Saacke, 1970). On the other hand, use of semen morphology as a measurement of semen fertility (or sire fertility) has been discussed for its value when semen within normal values is assessed (rev by Rodriguez-Martinez, 2003).

Sperm quality differs with the age of the sires (Almquist and Amann, 1976; Saeed et al., 1989). Considering that AI-dairy bulls are tested for fertility at an early age (usually 11-13 months of age), thresholds for sperm normality in terms of sperm morphology have been studied and set (Söderquist et al., 1991). Often, these thresholds are also used for bulls of an older age, including proven bulls. Recently, Hallap et al. (2004) has studied sperm morphology post-thaw in AI bulls, both when young (11-13 mo) and while bulls were awaiting progeny testing (4 y), finding that while sperm motility and membrane integrity improved when sires were older, sperm morphology did not significantly change with age. Since this study was done on frozen-thawed samples, it remains to be determined whether age influences sperm morphology in ejaculated, not-processed semen of progeny-tested bulls. Moreover, since the genital normality of the bulls can change over time and thus affect the quality of the semen they produce, there is a logical need to determine which levels of sperm abnormalities proven bulls have and also if these levels of abnormalities could be related to the fertility of the sires.

The aim of the present retrospective study was to examine relationships between sperm morphology in the semen of proven (e.g. progeny tested) bull sires of the Swedish Red and White (SRB) and Swedish Holstein (SLB) breeds to be used for the production of frozen doses for artificial insemination (AI) and their fertility after AI. Particular attention was paid to the influence of age and breed as well as the variation between- and within-bull for presence and level of sperm abnormalities.

Materials and Methods

Source of semen

Semen collected from eight Swedish Red and White (SRB) and four Swedish Holstein (SLB) proven bulls, e.g. selected for the breeding programme after a period of fertility assessment and progeny testing, was used in the present study. The bulls were stationed at Svensk Avel ek för (Örmsro, Skara) where the collected semen (sampled via artificial vagina) was routinely checked for volume (by weight

determination) and sperm concentration (using a photometer). Sperm motility was subjectively estimated under a phase contrast microscope (200x) equipped with a warm stage (+38°C), by the same operator. The mean value from evaluations on four fields was recorded. At regular intervals (1-3 months), samples from two consecutive ejaculates were prepared for and sent to a specialized andrological laboratory, that acts as the reference laboratory for Sweden, located at the Division of Comparative Reproduction, Obstetrics and Udder Health, Department of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, SLU, Uppsala, for manual determination of sperm concentration, and detailed morphological examination of sperm abnormalities and presence of foreign cells. Aliquots of the semen to be examined were used to prepare thin- and thick, escalated smears that, after being allowed to air-dried, were packed and sent. As well, aliquots of the semen were fixed in buffered formaldehyde (Hancock, 1957) for the preparation of wet smears. Finally, a part of the raw semen was used to determine sperm concentration, being assessed in two separate counting chambers using a Bürker haemocytometer, as initially described by Bane (1952). This regular assessment forms part of the quality assurance system of Svensk Avel ek.för. by agreement with SLU. Semen was collected from the bulls when they were between 60-106 months of age and the total number of evaluated ejaculates for these 12 bulls was 107.

Morphological examination of spermatozoa

Sperm head morphology was studied in thin smears prepared and stained with Carbol-fuchsin according to the method described by Williams (1920) and modified by Lagerlöf (1934). Five hundred spermatozoa were counted in each smear at a magnification of 1,000x in a light microscope to depict presence of abnormal head shapes (pear shaped, narrow, giant, small, and abaxial heads, detached heads [those with normal and abnormal head morphology] as well as abnormal mid-pieces). The presence of proximal cytoplasmic droplets, abnormal acrosomes, detached heads and abnormalities of the mid-piece and the tail were studied in wet preparations made from formol-saline fixed samples (Hancock, 1957) under a phase-contrast microscope at a magnification of 1,000x. Two hundred spermatozoa were counted in each preparation and the abnormalities (acrosomes, nuclear pouches, proximal and distal cytoplasmic droplets, mid-pieces and abnormal tails [double folded, single bent and coiled tails]) were classified according to a system developed by Bane (1961). The number of spermatozoa showing each class of abnormality was expressed as a percentage of the counted spermatozoa. Relative proportions of morphologically normal spermatozoa were estimated as mean percentage of the remaining spermatozoa without defects counted in wet smears and the remaining spermatozoa without head shape defects counted in stained smears. A thick, dried smear stained with haematoxylin-eosin or Papanicolaou was used to determine the presence and relative quantity of foreign cells (such as cells of the seminiferous epithelium, epididymal cells, epithelium of the urethra, prepuce/penis, accessory glands) as well as inflammatory cells (leukocytes, lymphocytes, monocytes/macrophages).

The relative presence of each foreign cell type was classed as 0= absent, 1= scarce, 2= moderate, 3= rich to very rich.

Fertility measures

The fertility of the proven bulls was reported, for each freezing batch prepared from the examined ejaculates, by Svensk Avel ek för as the non-corrected percentages of 56 day non-return rates (56d-NRR) (e.g. the percentage of inseminated females not returned to service within 56 days after AI with their frozen-thawed semen) or as estimated breeding value, e.g. values which, based on the 56-d NRR percentages, were corrected for a series of factors influencing fertility in cattle (season, inseminator, category of female, location of the country, etc). Both values had been used as a measure of fertility of individual freezing batches of the evaluated semen samples/bulls and compared.

Statistical analysis

The information from the 107 semen samples (sperm production, sperm morphology and fertility) was analysed statistically by using the Statistical Analysis Systems package (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA, version 8). Analysis of variance (PROC GLM) was applied to the data, according to a statistical model including the fixed effects of breed (SLB and SRB), age at semen collection (3 groups, < 70 months, 79-79 months, and ≥ 80 months of age) and bull nested within breed (4 SLB; 8 SRB). Residuals were calculated, and these residuals were correlated (using Spearman correlation) within breed. Differences were considered significant when $p < 0.05$.

Table 1: Age interval during collections, number of ejaculates, volume of ejaculate, sperm concentration (per mL), total sperm number (TSN) per ejaculate and of sperm motility (initial and post-thaw) among the evaluated sires (SRB: Swedish red and white breed; SLB: Swedish Holstein breed; Mean \pm SD).

Breed	Bull	Bull age during evaluation (mo)	Ejaculates (n)	Volume (mL)	Sperm numbers (10^9)		Sperm motility (%)	
					per mL	TSN	Initial	Post-thaw
SRB	A	66.2 \pm 5.3	7	7.2 \pm 2.4	0.77 \pm 0.2	5.9 \pm 3.1	71.8 \pm 2.4	51.9 \pm 2.4
	B	78.0 \pm 7.6	11	6.9 \pm 2.0	1.3 \pm 0.2	9.3 \pm 3.7	72.5 \pm 1.9	53.1 \pm 2.2
	C	89.0 \pm 7.2	12	6.5 \pm 2.2	0.99 \pm 0.1	6.4 \pm 2.3	72.5 \pm 2.6	52.1 \pm 1.7
	D	96.0 \pm 8.8	7	5.3 \pm 0.9	1.40 \pm 0.3	8.1 \pm 1.3	72.5 \pm 2.0	53.7 \pm 2.5
	E	76.2 \pm 7.1	7	6.2 \pm 1.2	1.12 \pm 0.3	6.9 \pm 1.9	71.8 \pm 2.4	53.1 \pm 2.4
	F	69.7 \pm 6.1	4	5.4 \pm 0.9	1.30 \pm 0.3	7.4 \pm 1.9	73.1 \pm 2.4	55.0 \pm 0.0
	G	68.0 \pm 5.5	9	4.8 \pm 1.1	1.07 \pm 0.2	5.2 \pm 1.9	71.9 \pm 1.7	55.8 \pm 3.7
	H	73.2 \pm 6.8	14	6.1 \pm 2.1	1.20 \pm 0.4	7.7 \pm 4.2	70.0 \pm 3.8	49.1 \pm 10.4
SLB	I	70.6 \pm 7.5	14	7.0 \pm 2.2	1.30 \pm 0.4	9.5 \pm 5.0	73.2 \pm 2.5	51.9 \pm 6.9
	J	82.0 \pm 7.5	11	6.0 \pm 1.3	0.94 \pm 0.1	5.7 \pm 1.4	70.9 \pm 3.2	51.8 \pm 2.4
	K	77.0 \pm 6.8	5	4.9 \pm 0.9	1.40 \pm 0.3	6.9 \pm 2.0	72.0 \pm 2.1	50.8 \pm 1.4
	L	77.0 \pm 8.3	6	6.8 \pm 1.1	1.50 \pm 0.2	10.3 \pm 2.1	71.7 \pm 2.0	52.5 \pm 2.5
Total means \pm SD		77.0\pm7.0	107	6.0\pm1.5	1.2\pm0.3	8.4\pm3.4	72.0\pm2.4	52.6\pm2.4

Results

The progeny-tested sires were examined for sperm morphology when they averaged 77.0 ± 7.0 months of age. The characteristics of the collected ejaculates are presented in **Table 1**. Semen volume averaged $(6.0 \pm 1.5$ mL, with an overall mean total sperm number of 8.4 ± 3.4 billion spermatozoa. Initial sperm motility averaged 72.0 ± 2.4 % while the post-thaw sperm motility of the frozen batches averaged 52.6 ± 2.4 %. Significant differences were detected for the variables ejaculate volume ($P < 0.05$), total sperm number ($P < 0.001$) and sperm concentration ($P < 0.05$) within and between breeds but there were no significant differences either within or between breeds with regards to initial or post-thaw motility.

Sperm morphology of the examined ejaculates per sire is summarized in **Table 2**. The relative overall frequency of spermatozoa depicting normal morphology varied significantly among sires ($P < 0.01$) and between breeds ($P < 0.001$), but was not significantly affected by age ($P = 0.0825$). Overall, the percentage of total sperm head abnormalities showed a mean of 15.0 ± 11.0 %, with 6/12 sires having more than 10% of sperm head abnormalities (highest mean was 36.7 ± 7.9 %). However, the percentages of individual sperm abnormalities varied largely among bulls ($P < 0.001$) and ejaculates ($P < 0.05$).

The highest mean value for individual sperm defects within bull was recorded for pear-shaped sperm heads (20.7 %, bull H), two bulls having significantly higher values than the rest of the sires ($P < 0.05$) (see **Table 2**). Differences were found for most sperm abnormalities, but with the exception of pear-shaped or narrow at the base anomalies, the mean values were always within what is expected for a bull sire, considered within acceptable limits.

The relative quantity of foreign cells in the ejaculates examined was low and did not exceed class level 1 (e.g. scarcity).

Table 3 presents the fertility (means \pm SD) of the freezing batches corresponding to the ejaculates examined for morphology, grouped per bull. Fertility is expressed either as uncorrected percentages of 56d-NRR or as estimated breeding values. While there were no significant differences in fertility among bulls when the 56d-NRR were compared, significant differences were present among bulls for corrected fertility values ($P < 0.001$).

Table 2: Percentages of sperm abnormalities in semen from proven sires (A-L) of the Swedish red and white (SRB) or Swedish Holstein (SLB) breed (mean \pm SD).

Sperm abnormality		Bulls												
		SRB								SLB				All bulls
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	
Head	Pear shaped	7.6 \pm 2.7	6.5 \pm 2.5	6.1 \pm 1.6	2.9 \pm 1.1	1.2 \pm 0.6	2.5 \pm 1.9	2.3 \pm 1.5	20.7 \pm 5.5	4.1 \pm 1.8	2.1 \pm 1.2	10.4 \pm 0.8	1.8 \pm 0.8	5.7 \pm 5.5
	Narrow at base	6.7 \pm 2.5	3.3 \pm 1.4	1.8 \pm 0.9	3.0 \pm 1.0	1.8 \pm 0.8	2.1 \pm 1.6	0.6 \pm 0.5	8.1 \pm 3.1	8.0 \pm 1.6	1.9 \pm 0.6	8.7 \pm 0.1	1.9 \pm 0.9	4.0 \pm 3.0
	Narrow	0.8 \pm 0.5	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.5 \pm 0.7	0.3 \pm 0.2	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.3	1.0 \pm 0.5	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.6	0.4 \pm 0.2
	Abnormal contour	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.4 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.2 \pm 0.3	0.3 \pm 0.3	0.3 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.3	0.3 \pm 0.3	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.5	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.3 \pm 0.4	0.3 \pm 0.1
	Variable size	1.1 \pm 0.6	1.9 \pm 0.7	2.6 \pm 1.3	0.7 \pm 0.8	1.3 \pm 0.7	1.2 \pm 0.4	1.9 \pm 0.7	1.6 \pm 0.8	0.6 \pm 0.3	1.4 \pm 0.8	1.4 \pm 0.9	0.9 \pm 0.8	1.4 \pm 0.5
	Loose abnormal	4.7 \pm 3.2	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.7 \pm 0.7	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.2 \pm 0.3	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.2 \pm 0.2	4.8 \pm 1.9	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.3	1.3 \pm 0.8	0.2 \pm 0.2	1.3 \pm 1.9
	Underdeveloped	1.1 \pm 0.9	0.9 \pm 0.4	1.7 \pm 1.1	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.2 \pm 0.2	1.0 \pm 0.4	1.1 \pm 0.4	0.9 \pm 0.4	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.5 \pm 0.7	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.4 \pm 0.3	0.7 \pm 0.4
	Nuclear pouches	0.4 \pm 0.5	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.9 \pm 0.9	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.3 \pm 0.2	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.2 \pm 0.2
	Acros. defect	0.2 \pm 0.3	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.2 \pm 0.4	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.7	0.2 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.2 \pm 0.1
	Acros. abnormal.	2.6 \pm 2.2	1.9 \pm 1.1	2.0 \pm 1.4	1.4 \pm 0.9	1.3 \pm 0.9	2.1 \pm 0.7	2.4 \pm 1.7	6.0 \pm 2.5	1.6 \pm 1.9	2.4 \pm 1.7	1.9 \pm 0.4	3.2 \pm 2.1	2.3 \pm 1.2
Abaxial	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.1 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.3	0.0 \pm 0.0	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.1 \pm 0.1	
Neck	Loose heads	8.3 \pm 5.8	1.2 \pm 1.0	1.2 \pm 1.0	0.8 \pm 0.8	1.6 \pm 1.2	2.1 \pm 1.9	0.8 \pm 0.5	5.8 \pm 2.4	0.4 \pm 0.7	1.2 \pm 1.4	2.7 \pm 1.0	1.3 \pm 1.0	2.4 \pm 2.8
Cyt. drops	Proximal	1.7 \pm 0.5	1.5 \pm 0.9	1.0 \pm 0.9	2.2 \pm 0.9	0.6 \pm 0.6	2.4 \pm 0.5	2.2 \pm 0.9	8.8 \pm 4.9	0.3 \pm 0.4	0.9 \pm 0.8	0.6 \pm 0.4	5.3 \pm 6.3	2.3 \pm 2.4
	Distal	17.5 \pm 11.5	4.0 \pm 3.4	9.7 \pm 7.3	2.6 \pm 1.6	5.9 \pm 6.8	4.3 \pm 6.2	6.9 \pm 6.9	10.4 \pm 7.0	0.8 \pm 0.6	5.1 \pm 4.0	2.0 \pm 3.1	13.0 \pm 14.0	6.6 \pm 4.5
Mid-piece	Abn. midpiece	0.8 \pm 0.9	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.9 \pm 0.7	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.8 \pm 0.9	2.0 \pm 0.9	0.7 \pm 0.7	1.1 \pm 0.8	0.9 \pm 0.8	1.2 \pm 0.9	1.0 \pm 0.8	0.9 \pm 0.4	0.9 \pm 0.4
Tail	Simple bent	2.0 \pm 2.4	2.8 \pm 3.1	2.3 \pm 1.5	0.3 \pm 0.3	0.9 \pm 0.7	0.5 \pm 0.5	0.3 \pm 0.2	5.5 \pm 3.3	1.0 \pm 0.8	1.2 \pm 0.6	2.3 \pm 0.8	2.0 \pm 1.7	1.7 \pm 1.4
	Under the head	0.9 \pm 0.9	0.9 \pm 0.7	1.3 \pm 0.9	0.2 \pm 0.3	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.4 \pm 0.2	0.3 \pm 0.3	1.6 \pm 1.2	0.3 \pm 0.4	0.6 \pm 0.5	0.3 \pm 0.3	0.8 \pm 0.4	0.6 \pm 0.4
	Double-folded	0.4 \pm 0.5	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.8 \pm 0.5	0.1 \pm 0.2	0.9 \pm 0.4	0.4 \pm 0.4	0.3 \pm 0.5	0.7 \pm 0.7	0.1 \pm 0.2	1.4 \pm 1.4	0.7 \pm 0.8	0.5 \pm 0.8	0.6 \pm 0.3

Table 3: Fertility after artificial insemination with frozen-thawed semen from the proven sires (A-L) expressed either as uncorrected percentages of 56-day Non-Return Rates (56d-NRR) or corrected for factors influencing outcome (Estimated breeding values). SRB: Swedish red and white breed, SLB: Swedish Holstein breed, means \pm SD.

Breed	Bull	Uncorrected 56-d NRR (%)	Estimated breeding values
SRB	A	64.0 \pm 7.0	98.0 \pm 7.0
	B	67.7 \pm 2.1	99.4 \pm 5.5
	C	64.4 \pm 3.9	96.5 \pm 4.0
	D	71.7 \pm 0.4	106.0 \pm 5.5
	E	64.2 \pm 3.6	97.2 \pm 3.7
	F	68.2 \pm 1.1	102.0 \pm 6.1
	G	63.8 \pm 2.9	97.5 \pm 3.0
	H	65.3 \pm 3.3	96.8 \pm 5.9
SLB	I	69.5 \pm 3.7	101.0 \pm 4.3
	J	66.0 \pm 3.6	96.2 \pm 3.2
	K	58.5 \pm 5.6	85.8 \pm 6.2
	L	67.7 \pm 2.1	99.4 \pm 5.5

Breed and bull within breed affected most sperm variables, including both total sperm numbers per ejaculate ($P < 0.001$) and the number of pathological sperm heads ($P < 0.01$). Most sperm variables varied significantly between ejaculates ($P < 0.05$ - 0.001). Age of the sires affected some semen and sperm parameters, e.g. ejaculate volume ($P < 0.05$), post-thaw sperm motility ($P < 0.05$), total sperm number within an ejaculate ($P < 0.001$) and proportion of nuclear pouches in spermatozoa ($P < 0.05$).

While the percentage of morphologically normal spermatozoa in the overall ejaculate set up was positively related to estimated breeding values ($r = 0.22$, $P < 0.05$), the relations for individual morphological defects and fertility were few. Considering all ejaculates, pear-shaped sperm heads were negatively related to fertility ($r = 0.80$, $P < 0.01$). Differences were present between breeds. While for SRB bulls the percentage of normal spermatozoa correlated positively with fertility ($r = 0.25$, $P < 0.05$), those of loose heads and proximal droplets were negatively related to fertility ($r = -0.39$, $P < 0.01$ and $r = -0.29$, $P < 0.05$, respectively); significant relations were not found for SLB bulls, most likely owing to the low number of SLB bulls examined.

Discussion

The present retrospective study aimed at determining whether sperm morphology in the semen of progeny tested bull sires of the Swedish Red and White (SRB) and Swedish Holstein (SLB) breeds related to the fertility outcome after AI. Sperm morphology differed between ejaculates, sires, breed and age. Six out of the twelve

sires had ejaculates with more than 10% of morphologically deviating sperm heads but with the exception of pear-shaped or narrow at the base anomalies, the mean values were always within the levels expected for a bull sire and thus considered within acceptable limits. Statistically corrected fertility output differed significantly among bulls and some, albeit few, sperm abnormalities were negatively correlated to fertility.

Significant differences were found between the two breeds with regard to the corrected fertility and morphological defects. No significance was found, however, with uncorrected fertility (e.g. 56d-NRR), in contradiction with other reports (Söderquist et al. 1991). Such differences can, obviously, reside in the number of the sires and ejaculates explored, the different age of the sires examined, as well as the different seasons when AIs were performed, all of which make difficult to compare the outcomes of these studies.

Sperm morphology varied significantly between breeds as well as between sires within breed. Age influenced few variables, such as total sperm numbers per ejaculate and few individual sperm abnormalities (nuclear pouches and abnormal sperm head contour). The latter findings agree with those of Söderquist et al. (1996) when looking at different defects in frozen-thawed semen of younger bulls (aged 14-36 months). Other studies linking sperm morphology and age are a bit contradictory. Foote et al (1977) reported an improvement in sperm morphology when bull sires reached 3-4 years of age while Padrik and Jaakma (2002) have shown a decrease in normal morphology in bulls from 4-5 and 6-7 years of age. The present results appear contradictory to what has been reported earlier in Sweden (Hultnäs, 1959; Söderquist et al., 1991) who could not find any relationship between age and morphological characteristics among unselected bulls aged from 15 to 26 months, or the findings from Hallap et al (2004) that registered no significant difference in sperm morphology in bull sires when aged 1 or 4 years. Individual differences and differences in age range can be behind the differences encountered. Moreover, since ageing is an ongoing process with important individual variation, bulls should be examined in longitudinal studies from when they start providing semen for AI until they are culled (for age) in order to determine when they peak maximal sperm production and when an eventual ageing effect starts.

Fertile bulls have more viable spermatozoa and a consistently lower incidence of morphologically abnormal sperm than non-fertile or sub-fertile bulls (Lagerlöf, 1934; Barth and Oko, 1984; Salisbury *et al.*, 1978; Saacke, 1982). Thus, bulls that fail in a breeding soundness evaluation generally have more sperm abnormalities than those who pass (Spitez *et al.*, 1988). Evidence of a relationship between sperm morphological characteristics of spermatozoa and individual differences in fertility was first presented by Williams in 1926 and Lagerlöf in 1934. Sperm abnormalities have traditionally been classified by sperm domain (head, tail, mid-piece, cytoplasmic droplets), relative importance (major or minor defects), or site of origin (primary: testis; secondary: epididymis; tertiary: accessory glands/post ejaculation). In 1934, Lagerlöf established a classification system that illustrated the relationship between different sperm abnormalities of fresh semen and fertility

in bulls used in natural service, his observations showing that the abnormalities in the fresh semen were correlated to the histopathological alterations found in the testes of low fertility bulls. This was the basis for the use of examination of sperm morphology as a test of semen quality in young AI bulls (Söderquist, 1991). In 1974, Morstin and Courot showed that ultrastructural changes of testicular origin in the nucleus, acrosome and mitochondria of spermatozoa occurred more frequently in low fertility AI bulls. However, studies by Gustafsson (1966) have shown that some sperm abnormalities, such as non-specific sperm tail abnormalities, do not originate in the testis but during epididymal transit.

Percentages of morphologically normal or of abnormal spermatozoa are related, positively or negatively, to conception rate (Jaczewski and Kazimirow, 1997; Gotschall and Mattos, 1997; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2002; Padrik and Jaakma, 2002). The results from the present study confirm there is a relation between the number of morphologically normal spermatozoa in the ejaculate and the fertility outcome after AI of frozen-thawed semen produced with this particular ejaculate. As well, presence of a certain level of morphologically abnormal spermatozoa negatively affects fertility, and the results found in the present study suggest that a level of morphologically abnormal sperm heads above 10% remains a valuable indicator for this relationship.

As stated before, sperm abnormalities can be classified for their presence and their relation to pathologies in the testis (Lagerlöf, 1934). Sperm abnormalities can also be grouped for their significance as compensable or uncompensable (rev by Saacke *et al.*, 1998). Inability to undergo transport to the uterine tube or to penetrate the zona pellucida can be compensated by increasing the number of spermatozoa in the sperm dose. Those sperm abnormalities considered uncompensable are, however, present in spermatozoa which are perhaps capable of penetrating the zona pellucida of the oocyte, but which fail to cause cleavage or result in non-viable embryos. Such defects can not be compensated by simply increasing the number of spermatozoa in the sperm dose used for AI (Saacke, 1982; Barth, 1997). Abnormalities of the sperm head or the presence of proximal cytoplasmic droplets reflect defects of nuclear chromatin condensation respectively immaturity of the spermatozoa and are likely to be uncompensable (Parkinson, 2004). Studies by Saacke (1970) have shown that high percentages of such abnormal spermatozoa in a semen sample are correlated with a lower fertility of the bull, a relationship confirmed in the present study. Sperm abnormalities can also be classed according to their effect upon fertility into major and minor defects (Blom, 1983). Major defects include most abnormalities of the head and mid-piece, proximal cytoplasmic droplets and single abnormalities that are present at high frequency. Minor defects include looped tails, detached sperm heads and distal cytoplasmic droplets. In the present study, sperm defects were not classed according to any of these classifications but listed when present in each spermatozoon counted. Abnormalities that compromise the sperm head shape, and that most likely occur during spermiogenesis, are responsible for a lowered fertility when semen is used for AI. Being such abnormalities not compensable, freezing batches of bulls with more than 10% of abnormal sperm head morphology

in the ejaculate would risk a lower fertility even with a relatively higher sperm number in the straw.

Wilmington (1981) and Söderquist et al. (1991) have stated that a significant impairment of fertility in bulls can be associated with the presence of sperm head abnormalities in their semen. Such abnormalities are very important since they adversely affect the binding and passage through the zona pellucida (ZP). For instance, using IVF as a test environment, Thundathil et al. (2000) have found that no spermatozoa with the knobbed acrosome defect could penetrate the ZP and those embryos which were fertilized by 'normal' spermatozoa from affected bulls had a slower rate of cleavage than those from control bulls. Using the same methodological approach, spermatozoa with a misshapen pyriform head (pear-shaped head), a deformity appearing in testicular hypoplasia and as an acquired defect during testicular degeneration, impaired both fertilization rate and subsequent embryonic development (Thundathil et al., 1999).

The degree of deformity of the sperm head has been related to decreased fertility (Petac and Kosec, 1989; Nöthling and Arndt, 1995), and suggested to be as a consequence of a reduction of its total surface area (Barth et al., 1992). Some bulls normally produce spermatozoa that are relatively pyriform in shape and, as a consequence, suggested to be relatively sub-fertile (Parkinson, 2004). If a defective chromatin condensation occurs during spermiogenesis and leads to these morphological deviations, a defective decondensation during pronuclear formation can very well be behind the reported infertility caused by high levels of pear-shaped sperm heads. However, conclusive studies are yet to be performed in order to determine the way pear-shaped sperm heads compromise fertility. Noteworthy, the highest mean value for individual sperm defects/bull was, in the present study, recorded for pear-shaped sperm heads (20.7 %). Considering pyriform-shaped sperm heads appear as importantly related to fertility decrease, the presence of this particular abnormality should be carefully monitored.

Few other sperm abnormalities were above what is expected as within acceptable limits such as presence of proximal cytoplasmic droplets or distal cytoplasmic droplets. The significance of these defects is different when related to fertility. Distal cytoplasmic droplets are not generally regarded as serious abnormalities although being at high percentages (Barth, 1997). Substantial impairment of fertility results, however, when proximal droplets are present (Linford et al., 1976; Blom, 1977; Söderquist et al., 1991; Saacke et al., 1995). Furthermore, when sperm with proximal droplets have been used in IVF, cleavage rates of embryos are poor (Amann et al., 2000). Presence of a proximal cytoplasmic droplet is indicative of sperm immaturity (the droplet usually migrates along the mid-piece during sperm maturation in the ductus epididymidis). Wood et al. (1986) showed that the proportion of coiled tails and proximal droplets, indicators of sperm maturity, provided the best prediction of fertility in frozen semen, thus requesting a careful consideration of their presence.

Several studies have shown that immature bulls have high percentages of proximal droplets in the peri-pubertal period, but that rapidly decline to normal levels

thereafter (Evans et al., 1995; Johnson et al., 1998; Arteaga et al., 2001; Padrik and Jaakma, 2002), indicating a relationship to the age of the sires. All bulls included in the present study were within such age interval that levels of proximal cytoplasmic droplets were not affected by age. This confirms previous findings that older bulls display low, repeatable percentages of proximal droplets (Söderquist et al., 1996).

In sum, the results of the present study confirm there is a relationship between sperm morphology and fertility after AI in bull sires thus calling for routine, frequent screenings of sperm morphology in AI-stud bull sires. Owing to the possible presence of a relationship with age, at least in some sires, it is of importance to follow up these evaluations during their entire active life.

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General Conclusions

- There is a relationship between sperm morphology and fertility after AI in progeny-tested dairy bull sires.
- Sperm head morphology appears to be the predominant variable in this relation.
- The results found that a level of >10% of morphologically abnormal sperm heads is a valuable indicator for this relationship.
- It is important that routine, frequently done screenings of sperm morphology in AI-stud bull sires should be carried out during their entire active life.
- Owing to the presence of age-dependent, and breed variations, sperm morphology should be studied in a larger number of progeny-tested AI bulls, over a longer period.

Final prospects

Since sperm head abnormalities are to be primarily considered as uncompensable, studies should be performed to determine the extent they compromise fertility, e.g. what threshold is to be considered risk for a decreased fertility in terms of proportions of the abnormalities and the number of spermatozoa affected. Long-lasting, longitudinal studies of sperm morphology screening are, therefore, advisable.

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