Influence of Acid Hydrolysis, Saponification and Sample Clean-up on the Measurement of Phytosterols in Dairy Cattle Feed Using GC/MS and GC/Flame Ionization Detection

Samantha Duong,[1] Norbert Strobel,[2] Saman Buddhadasa,[2] Katherine Stockham,[2] Martin J. Auldist,[3] William J. Wales,[3] Peter J. Moate,[3] John D. Orbell,[1] and Marlene J. Cran[1*]

[1]Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 8001

[2]Australian Government, National Measurement Institute, 1/153 Bertie Street, Port Melbourne VIC 3207

[3]Australian Government, Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, 1301 Hazeldean Road, Ellinbank VIC 3821

Running title: Phytosterol Content in Dairy Cattle Feed Using GC/MS/FID

*Corresponding author: Marlene J. Cran, Ph: +61(3) 9919 7642, marlene.cran@vu.edu.au

Non-standard Abbreviations:

flame ionization detection (FID); N,O-bis-(trimethylsilyl) trifluoroacetamide with 1% trimethylchlorosilane (BSTFA+1%TMCS); linearity dynamic range (LDR); certified reference materials (CRM); National Institute of Standard and Technology (NIST); secondary reference material (SRM); measurement uncertainty (MU); limit of reporting (LOR).

Keywords: phytosterols, dairy cattle feed, sample pretreatment, flame ionization detection

23   **Abstract**

24   The fortification of processed foods including dairy products is increasingly commonplace with

25   phytosterols among the many compounds used to improve the nutritional value of food products. It is

26   also increasingly common practice for some dairy cattle feeds to be fortified for their potential to

27   increase phytosterol levels in milk. In this paper, a combined, streamlined protocol using acid

28   hydrolysis, saponification and sample clean-up was developed to enable the rapid and reliable. The

29   method was developed with focus on streamlining the overall technique to make it suitable for

30   commercial laboratories, to reduce labor and consumable costs, while maintaining accuracy. A total

31   of twelve different feed types commonly used in the dairy industry were analyzed with the highest

32   and lowest sterol contents found in cotton seed oil and tannin with average phytosterol contents of

33   256 mg and <30 mg per 100 g, respectively. With a limit of reporting of 30 mg/kg for individual sterols

34   and a correlation coefficient >0.99, the method was validated for milk to enable feeding comparison

35   studies with respect to the total phytosterol content in raw milk.

1 Introduction

The Australian dairy industry has a net worth of over 1.5 billion dollars with up to 30% of all production exported internationally, predominately to Asia [1]. With a net share of 6% worldwide, Australian dairy companies are collectively the third largest global dairy industry. To meet production demands, farmers typically invest around 30% of the farming budget towards pasture production which can include planting, harvesting, feeding and storage. In 2014/15, there were approximately 9.7 billion liters of milk produced in Australia [1], but rising costs associated with dairy farming have led to a decline in the total number of productive farms. A growing demands for dairy supplies has required the remaining farms to increase their herd size and, over the past 30 years, numbers have increased from around 85 to the current average of 284 cows per farm [1, 2]. Herd sizes will most likely continue to expand to meet growing demands and this will subsequently increase feed requirements.

Phytosterols are plant based sterols that are the equivalent of cholesterols in animals and with more than 200 forms identified [3], these are vital structural components of plant membranes and other metabolic precursors [4, 5]. There are 5 main forms of phytosterols including free, hydroxycinnamic acid esters, steryl esters, steryl glycosides and acylated steryl glycols, with the latter known as conjugates [3]. The health benefits relating to the consumption of phytosterols are well understood with studies showing a reduction in dietary cholesterol and subsequent lower risk of cardiovascular disease [3, 6, 7]. With the status of "generally recognised as safe" granted by the United States Food and Drug Administration [6, 7], phytosterols are commonly fortified in various food products including milk, cheese, chocolate, pasta and fat spreads, among many others [3, 6, 8]. Worldwide, leading food authorities generally permit producers of products containing phytosterols to advertise health claims such as those related to a reduction in cholesterol or reduced risks of cardiovascular disease [7, 9, 10]. There have been few long-term studies into the effects of high

3

59 phytosterol consumption, however some short-term studies have demonstrated that a diet high

60 phytosterols can impair vitamin D adsorption and reduce carotenoid levels in plasma by 15-20% [11-

61 13].

62 There is an ever-increasing interest in enhancing the health benefits of various food products

63 with a major focus on milk and other dairy products [14-16]. Such enhancements are ideally achieved

64 naturally through changes in the feeding of dairy cows to ensure food safety, to minimize human

65 error and subsequent over fortification or consumption. At present, there are a few reported studies

66 investigating the influence of cattle feed on the enhancement of macro- or micro-nutrients in milk.

67 However, these are primarily focused on products that are fortified after milk production with few

68 related to phytosterol fortification [8, 17, 18]. As a result, there is a growing need for the rapid,

69 streamlined, and accurate measurement of phytosterols and their conjugates in an array of matrices

70 [19, 20].

71 Many past studies have used only saponification to determine phytosterol fatty esters as these

72 are the forms commonly found in fortified food products [21-24]. However, due to the significant

73 amount of sterol conjugates, a technique liberating all phytosterol forms including the conjugates is

74 necessary to determine total phytosterol levels [6, 8, 25, 26]. Therefore, acid hydrolysis has been used

75 to liberate sterol glycosides which is then followed by saponification to ensure all sterol conjugates

76 are liberate and are free for extraction [27]. There is an increasing concern with the use of acid

77 hydrolysis, however, since the isomerization of avenasterol and fucosterol has been observed when

78 using this technique. Although this has led to the development of alternative means such as

79 enzymatic treatments to avoid this complication [28-30]. In most food matrices, avenasterol and

80 fucosterol are generally found in insignificant amounts compared to total phytosterols and therefore

81 the use of acid hydrolysis is generally suitable [6, 26, 31].

82   Another disadvantage of using acid hydrolysis is the aggressive nature of the reaction that can

83   lead to the increased extraction of non-targeted compounds. Adequate sample clean-up is therefore

84   essential for sterol quantification in order to improve instrumentation analysis by removing potential

85   interfering compounds. Techniques including TLC have been used in the past and although the

86   method was effective, it was found to be time consuming and lacked the required rigor for routine

87   testing [32, 33]. Other methods based on SPE have been reported as being more efficient and

88   convenient techniques allowing for the purification of sterols prior to analysis [34, 35].

89   In our recent study, an optimized saponification method for the determination of total sterols

90   was reported [36]. In the present paper, an extension of this method is reported for the

91   determination of total phytosterols and their conjugates in dairy cattle feed with a view to assessing

92   major cattle feeds commonly used in Australia. A novel extraction technique including acid

93   hydrolysis, sample clean-up and analysis by GC/MS and GC/flame ionization detection (FID) was

94   optimized and a range of feeds were analyzed for total phytosterol content.

95   **2   Materials and methods**

96   **2.1   Standards and other chemicals**

97   Sterol standards for quantification (with certified assay purities given in brackets) included:

98   cholesterol (99%), brassicasterol (95%), campesterol (65%), stigmasterol (95%), lanosterol (93%), β-

99   sitosterol (97%), cholestenol (95%), lathosterol (98%), fucosterol (93%), stigmastanol (95%) and

100   demosterol (84%). A surrogate standard, 5β-cholestan-3α-ol (98%), was added at the beginning of

101   each extraction to compensate for any degradation or loss from the extraction process, for quality

102   assurance purposes, and as an internal standard during the data interpretation stage. All standards

103   were purchased from Sigma Aldrich (Sydney, Australia) or Steraloids Inc. (Rhode Island, USA) and

104   were prepared in cyclohexane with a stock concentration of 500 mg L^{-1}.

105   Solvents including cyclohexane, hexane, toluene, n-heptane, ethanol, chloroform, and methanol

106   and hydrochloric acid were purchased from Merck Australia (Melbourne, Australia) with purities

107   greater than 95%. Pyridine was obtained from Sigma Aldrich (Sydney, Australia). N,O-bis-

108   (trimethylsilyl) trifluoroacetamide with 1% trimethylchlorosilane (BSTFA+1%TMCS) was purchased

109   from Grace Davison (Melbourne, Australia). Deionized water was used throughout the experiments

110   and was obtained using a Millipore water purification system (Element A10).

111   The reagent 5 M potassium hydroxide (assay purity 85% from sigma Aldrich) was prepared in a

112   solution of 10:90% (v/v) water:ethanol. Different hydrochloric acid hydrolysis solutions were used: (i)

113   prepared in 100% water for cattle feed samples (4 M HCl), (ii) 8 M HCl prepared in ethanol for

114   unfortified milk, and (iii) prepared in 50% ethanol in water non-cattle feed samples (4 M HCl). The

115   solvents used for solid phase extraction included n-heptane, chloroform and a methanol:chloroform

116   mixture (20:80% (v/v)).

117   A total of 3 samples were used to represent the common matrices studied and to efficiently

118   develop and validate the methods for a large range of matrix types. These representative samples

119   included milk powder with a known cholesterol content of 13 mg/100 mL and Vega pure E with a

120   certified total phytosterols content of 6200 mg/100 g. The milk powder and Vega pure E were used to

121   represent the fatty matrices and lucerne hay was used for cattle feed samples.

122   **2.2   Sterol quantification**

123   Quantification of the phytosterols was achieved using FID with appropriate reference standards

124   and 5β-cholestan-3α-ol as the internal standard to create traditional calibration curves. Confirmation

125   of sterol identification was achieved using MS [37]. The linearity dynamic range (LDR) for the majority

126   of individual phytosterols was found to be 0.1 to 200 mg/L, except for brassicasterol and campestanol

127   where the LDR was 0.1 to 100 mg/L due to the limited of availability of reference standards. The

128   correlation coefficient for all sterols was >0.99. The LDR for cholesterol was determined to be 0.1 to

129   1000 mg/L with a correlation coefficient >0.99 (y=0.044x).

130   **2.3   Consumables and equipment**

131   Incubation of the hydrolysis and saponification sample mixtures were performed in a shaking

132   water bath (WB4D, Ratek, Melbourne, Australia) with a maximum temperature of 100°C. Sample

133   hydrolysis was performed using 44 and 60 mL screwcap vials with Teflon septa. Evaporation of

134   solvents of volumes greater than 1 mL was performed using an evaporating nitrogen manifold

135   (Thermo Fisher, Australia) and derivatization/extract evaporation for volumes less than 1 mL were

136   performed using a heating block with GC holding plate and evaporating manifold (Ratek, Melbourne,

137   Australia).

138   The SPE cartridges used included a 5 g amino propyl phase cartridge (particle size 40 μm and volume

139   of 20 mL purchased from Agilent Technologies, Melbourne, Australia) and a silica Sep-Pak 690 mg

140   cartridge (particle size 55-105 μm and volume of 2 mL purchased from Waters, Melbourne Australia).

141   The SPE was performed in a vacuum manifold (Sigma Aldrich, Australia) and all small volumes were

142   accurately measured using piston operated volume aspirator ranging from 10 to 1000 μL, or a positive

143   displacement piston operated volume aspirator.

144   **2.4   GC analysis**

145   Derivatized sample extracts were analyzed using an Agilent 7890 Gas Chromatograph coupled

146   with a 5975 C MS and FID detectors. Chromatographic separation was achieved using a HP-5MS (5%-

147   phenyl-methylpolysiloxane 30 m x 0.25 mm, film thickness 0.25 μm) capillary column with a 3 m

148   deactivated silica column (guard column). The GC temperature program for the analysis initially

149   started at 245°C and was ramped to 265°C at 2°C min^{-1}, followed by a ramp to 290°C at 3.5°C min^{-1}

150   where it was maintained for 8 minutes. The carrier gas used was helium with a flow 3.1 mL min^{-1}. A

151   split injection mode of 1:5 was used with an injector temperature 310°C. The instrumentation was

152   also program to perform a back-flush after each analysis for 7.5 minutes at 24.6 psi. The FID

153   temperature was set at 300°C (total detector flow 30 m min^{-1}) and the MS source at 250°C (scan

154   mode ion 50-500 atomic mass units) with a 1:1 split for each detector.

155   **2.5   Feed sampling and extraction**

156   **2.5.1   Feed samples**

157   All feed samples used for this study were provided by the Department of Economic

158   Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources and included lucerne, pasture (rye grass), maize silage,

159   pasture silage, grape marc (dried and ensiled), wheat, canola, tannin, mineral mix, cotton oil and

160   molasses. Replicate samples obtained between 2010 and 2011 from different seasons were also

161   analyzed. All feed samples were stored in the freezer until analysis and were then prepared using a

162   grinding mill (Foss CT 293 Cyclotec^{TM}) and a high-powered homogenizer (Robot Coupe Blixer® 3). Total

163   solids were also determined for all cattle feed samples by subtracting the moisture content which was

164   determined gravimetrically by oven drying at 104°C until constant weight was obtained.

165   **2.5.2   Extraction of cattle feed samples**

166   For each sample, 0.5 -1.5 g was weighed into a 60 mL screw cap vial containing 2-3 boiling

167   chips. A 5 mL aliquot of heptane, known amounts of 5β-cholestan-3α-ol and 10 mL of 4 M aqueous

168   HCl was added to the sample vial which was then capped, mixed and incubated at 80°C for 30

169   minutes. The vial was shaken intermittently every 10-15 minutes during incubation. Following

170   incubation, the vial mixture was cooled to room temperature, then 20 mL of 5 M ethanolic KOH was

171   slowly added to the sample vial in order to neutralize the acid hydrolysis solution. The vial was then

172   recapped, mixed and incubated at 80°C for 30 minutes with intermittent shaking every 10-15 minutes.

173   Following this second incubation, the sample vial was cooled to room temperature before 8 mL of

174 aqueous 4 M hydrochloric acid and 8 mL of water was added. The vial was recapped, shaken and

175 allowed to settle to form two distinct layers after which the organic layer was transferred to a test

176 tube and the volume reduced to 4 mL using nitrogen gas. Since sterols are non-volatile compounds,

177 they are stable during this evaporation process and are not removed by the nitrogen purge. This step

178 was then followed by sample clean-up using SPE.

179 **2.5.3 Sample clean-up**

180   Prior to sample clean-up, the amino propyl SPE cartridge was conditioned with 15 mL of

181 heptane. Then 1 mL of sample extract was loaded onto the cartridge and allowed to pass through.

182 Another 15 mL of heptane was passed through the cartridge with this fraction discarded. The sterols

183 were then eluted using 25 mL of and 80:20% (v/v) methanol:chloroform mixture, blown down and

184 then transferred to a GC vial for derivatization.

185 **2.5.4 Extraction of unfortified milk**

186   For each milk sample, 5 mL was weighed into a 60 mL screw cap vial containing 2-3 boiling

187 chips. A 5-mL aliquot of heptane, known amounts of 5β-cholestan-3α-ol and 5 mL of 8 M ethanolic

188 HCl was added to the sample vial which was then capped, mixed and incubated at 80°C for 30

189 minutes. The vial was shaken intermittently every 10-15 minutes during incubation. Following

190 incubation, the vial mixture was cooled to room temperature, then 20 mL of 5 M ethanolic KOH was

191 slowly added to the sample vial. The vial was then recapped, mixed and incubated at 80°C for 30

192 minutes with intermittent shaking every 10-15 minutes. Following this second incubation, the sample

193 vial was cooled to room temperature before 4 mL of aqueous was added. The vial was recapped,

194 shaken and allowed to settle to form two distinct layers after which the organic layer was transferred

195 to a test tube and the volume reduced to 1 mL under nitrogen gas to produce the sample extract

196 which was then subjected to derivatization.

197 **2.5.5   Sample derivatization**

198   Sample extracts were evaporated to dryness under nitrogen in the GC vial, after which 300 μL of

199   BSTFA+1%TCMS and 700 μL of a 3:4 volume ratio of toluene:pyridine mixture was added. The vial was

200   then capped, shaken and incubated at 80°C for 20 minutes. For samples with insignificant or no

201   phytosterol glycoside content, i.e. high sterol ester content samples, the extraction method presented

202   in "extraction of unfortified milk" was used with some modifications. In the first incubation step, 5

203   mL of 5 M ethanolic KOH was added to sample vial rather than aqueous HCl. After incubation, the vial

204   was cooled to room temperature and 4 mL of water was added. The vial was then recapped, shaken

205   and allowed to settle until two distinct layers were observed. The organic layer was collected and

206   reduced to 1 mL using nitrogen. The extract was then transferred to a GC vial and the derivatization

207   process as "sample derivatization" was followed.

208   **2.6   Method validation**

209   Method validation was performed using certified reference materials (CRMs) obtained from

210   National Institute of Standard and Technology (NIST, USA) in order to obtain samples where the

211   target sterols were present homogenously throughout the matrices. The CRMs used included NIST

212   3250 *Serenoa repens* seed fruit (certified for β-sitosterol, stigmasterol and campesterol), and meat

213   homogenate NIST 1546 (certified for cholesterol). The secondary reference material (SRM) studied

214   was Vega pure E, a phytosterol fatty ester paste (BASF^{TM}, certified for β-sitosterol, campesterol,

215   stigmasterol, brassicasterol and stigmastanol). In addition, recoveries were performed on milk

216   samples that were purchased from local markets to investigate whether the method was suitable for

217   low level phytosterol measurements.

218   **2.7   Statistical analysis**

219   The measurement uncertainty (MU) determined for this research was based on ISO/IEC Guide 98-

220   3, 2008 using the top-down approach to incorporate validation data including recovery, duplicates,

221   reference standard calibration uncertainty and quality control for the final uncertainty estimation.

222   This approach was chosen as it would allow for the precision, accuracy and any systematic bias in the

223   methods [38]. For this study, the recovery and duplicate data included 7 milk matrix spikes, 3 water

224   matrix spikes, 9 NIST 1546 meat homogenate CRM samples, 7 NIST 3250 *Serenoa repens* CRM

225   samples, and 26 Vega pure E SRM samples. Given the high cost of the CRM and SRM materials, it was

226   not possible to perform spike-recovery experiments with hay and silage samples. The uncertainty was

227   determined by the square root of the sum of the relative standard deviations of: the standard

228   preparation, the calibration standard, the recovery, and the duplicates. A coverage factor of 2 was

229   applied to the uncertainty to expand the confidence interval to 95%. In addition, an analysis of

230   variance was performed to determine significances between parameters during the method

231   development with a post-hoc analysis using the Tukey approach.

232   **3   Results and discussion**

233   In our previous study, a method for the determination of total sterols was reported [36] which

234   was optimized based on existing saponification methods [8, 39, 40]. In the present study, further

235   optimization of the method was undertaken with the focus on the acid hydrolysis of samples prior to

236   GC analysis. The acid hydrolysis method development comprised of an investigation of critical aspects

237   including: hydrolysis solution composition; acid concentration and incubation period; and sample

238   extract clean-up.

239   **3.1   Effect of ethanol content in acid hydrolysis solution**

240   A total of 13 different feed sample matrices were investigated which included 12 types of

241   animal feed and 1 milk sample. To maximize the extraction of phytosterols from these matrices, the

242 acid hydrolysis solution composition is a critical factor as it contributes to sample solubility and cell

243 lysis of plant materials. Previous studies have utilized two distinct acid hydrolysis solutions prepared

244 in either water (for food samples) [8, 26] or in ethanol (for plant materials) [41]. Given the broad

245 range of matrices in the present study, a hydrolysis solution composition that was suitable for all the

246 matrices was required. Four solution systems were investigated including acid prepared in: water

247 only; 20% v/v ethanol in water; 50 v/v ethanol in water; and ethanol only. For optimization, milk

248 powder, lucerne and Vega pure E (a reference fatty paste) were selected to represent the dominant

249 sample types, i.e. milk, plant and fatty samples respectively.

250 Figure 1 shows the quantity of total sterols extracted from the three sample types using the

251 different hydrolysis solution compositions. The data demonstrates that for fatty samples (i.e. Vega

252 pure E), an increase in ethanol content improved sterol recovery whereas higher water contents

253 decreased the solubility for the subsequent saponification reaction. In the case of lucerne, higher

254 ethanol contents in the hydrolysis solution decreased the total sterol recovery with up to 34% lower

255 sterol recovery in ethanol only compared to a water only acid solution. The recovery of total sterols

256 from milk powder was satisfactory at levels up to and including 50% ethanol. It was therefore

257 concluded that for milk and high fat samples, an acid hydrolysis solution prepared using 50% ethanol

258 in water was adequate. For plant-based samples, an aqueous acid hydrolysis solution was the most

259 suitable.

260 **3.2   Effect of acid concentration and incubation time**

261 Acid concentration is critical to efficiently break the glycosidic bonds *via* hydrolysis in order to

262 maximize the liberation of sterol glycosides. In this study, HCl concentrations of 4, 5, and 6 M were

263 trialed with results showing that no significant recoveries were gained of the three selected matrices

264 using higher acid concentration as shown in Table 1. The hydrolysis incubation time was also studied

265   in order to optimize the time needed to ensure all glycosidic bonds are cleaved. Although the

266   saponification incubation time has been investigated previously [36], the present study further

267   explored the hydrolysis time prior to the addition to saponification mixture to ensure that the

268   hydrolysis solution did not affect the saponification process. Three incubation time brackets were

269   selected, i.e. 30, 60 and 90 minutes, and were applied to the hydrolysis of the three representative

270   samples at 4 M. As shown in Table 1, the results demonstrate that complete hydrolysis was obtained

271   with the minimum incubation period of 30 minutes with no significant increase when incubated for

272   longer times.

273   It was also observed that doubling the volume of the saponification solution after hydrolysis

274   neutralized the acid with any excess continuing the saponification reaction. Further verification with

275   different feed matrices was required to ensure the saponification incubation time of 30 minutes was

276   still applicable from previously optimized conditions [36]. Figure 2 demonstrates that 30 minutes of

277   saponification incubation time was still applicable and no significant gain was obtained for longer

278   incubation periods. Although grape marc gained *ca*. 7% of total sterol recovery, this was not deemed

279   to be significant to increase the incubation time.

280   **3.3   Effect of acid addition following saponification**

281   The composition of plant matrices is generally more complex than milk or fat samples and can

282   therefore require additional or modified extraction techniques. In the sterol extraction method, acid

283   and water are added to the sample mixture after saponification with the addition of water facilitating

284   the solubility of salts, glycerine, and fatty acid salts, while leaving the un-saponifiable fraction to be

285   extracted into the organic phase. The addition of acid neutralized the alkaline saponification solution

286   thereby increasing the ionic strength of the aqueous phase in order to minimize the emulsion

287   between the organic and aqueous layers. This process was very effective for plant samples, however

288   for the milk and fat samples, an emulsion between layers was not observed. In this case, the addition

289   of the acid would potentially result in the conversion of fats to their alcohol conjugate and

290   subsequent solubilization of these compounds into the organic layer thus creating non-targeted

291   interferences.

292   Experiments were performed to determine whether the addition of acid could be omitted for

293   milk and high fat samples only. For the milk and oil sample extracted with and without the addition of

294   acid, the results showed no significant gain was obtained for the addition of acid. The addition of acid

295   after saponification was therefore omitted for milk, high fat, oil or fat only samples. Conversely, the

296   addition of the acid in plant materials was continued in order to optimize the extraction. This was

297   demonstrated by performing a recovery with no acid and no SPE clean-up which resulted in a

298   cholesterol level of 11.5 mg/100 mL of milk. No significant gain was achieved with the use of acid and

299   SPE clean-up with only 11.6 mg/100 mL of cholesterol measured suggesting the additional steps could

300   be omitted without detriment to the recovery.

301   **3.4   Optimization of sample clean-up and elution**

302   The use of SPE was further investigated as a clean-up step in this study as sterols can be

303   selectively purified providing the correct phase is used [42, 43]. Several stationary phases are used

304   for this purpose, including cartridges comprised of silica and an aminopropyl phase [6, 26, 44, 45]. For

305   this study, both silica and aminopropyl solid phase cartridges were selected for clean-up investigation.

306   The initial work was performed using reference standards, with both phases able to perform

307   satisfactory recoveries for the Vega pure E ranging from 90-110% for both silica and aminopropyl

308   phase. However, when sample extracts were trialed, no profile change was observed for the silica SPE

309   and it was subsequently confirmed using GC-MS/FID that the silica cartridge was unable to remove

310   non-targeted compounds from the extracts (data not shown). Conversely, the aminopropyl cartridge

311   was able to significantly remove non-targeted compounds while recovering sterols within a

312   satisfactory range (80-120%) for the level of the component measured in accordance with relevant

313   validation guidelines [46].

314   Shown in Figure 3 (a) and (b) are examples of the lucerne extract chromatograms using the silica

315   and aminopropyl phase in the SPE clean-up, respectively. It is clear that the aminopropyl phase is

316   able to selectively remove non-targeted compounds within the sterol chromatographical range

317   between 13 and 17 minutes, whereas the silica is unable to remove non-sterol compounds from the

318   extracts. The aminopropyl SPE clearly demonstrates greater efficiency at removing non-target

319   compounds eluting at 14 minutes which was identified as the surrogate standard 5βcholestan-3α-ol

320   based on the retention time from the reference standard and mass spectral database library. It was

321   observed that for fractions collected by SPE, not all phytosterols were recovered suggesting that the

322   SPE sorbent capacity was too low to retain the target analyte in the extract. A dilution of the lucerne

323   extracts was therefore trialed on the SPE to determine the phase capacity required for methods

324   extracts. Using 320 mg sorbent, a 1 in 5 dilution resulted in recoveries of 102% and 116% of the

325   surrogate (5β-cholestan-3α-ol) and β-sitosterol respectively. For a 1 in 2 dilution, recoveries of 23%

326   and 38% were obtained for the surrogate and β-sitosterol respectively suggesting that the 1 in 5

327   dilution resulted in more satisfactory recoveries.

328   For the majority of feed matrices, 1.5 g of sorbent in the SPE stage is typically used effectively.

329   However, in this study 5 g of sorbent was used in order to safeguard against possible SPE overload

330   capacity issues for unknown cattle feed matrices. This increase in sorbent material subsequently

331   required the use of additional solvent to discard non-targeted compounds and elute target sterols. As

332   a result of this increase in sorbent, an investigation into appropriate solvent polarity strength was

333   studied to obtain adequate separation between the target and non-target analytes. In this case, the

334   elution of sterols from the grape marc extract was investigated using 45 mL of chloroform and 25 mL

335   of an 80:20% (v/v) chloroform:methanol mixture. For the chloroform only extraction, 88% and 93% of

336   β-sitosterol and stigmastanol were recovered respectively. For the lower volume mixed solvent,

337   recoveries of 107% and 104% of β-sitosterol and stigmastanol were obtained respectively. The results

338   demonstrate that a reduced volume of the mixed solvent results in a higher recovery than the larger

339   volume of chloroform only which may be due to the greater polarity of the chloroform methanol

340   mixture. It is important to note that during the process of the method development, hazardous and

341   potentially carcinogenic reagents and solvent including toluene, pyridine and chloroform were used

342   sparingly to reduce exposure and to limit the generation toxic waste.

343   **3.5   Method validation**

344   Validation of the total phytosterol and cholesterol extraction methods were performed on two

345   CRMs, one SRM, and additional spiked samples using stigmasterol at the limit of reporting (LOR),

346   2×LOR, and 5×LOR where the LOR is 0.02 mg/100 mL for milk and 1 mg/100 mL for other liquid

347   samples. In the case of the spiked samples, the spiking was performed prior to the hydrolysis process.

348   As shown in Table 2, the relative standard deviation for all samples was less than 12% and satisfactory

349   recoveries were obtained for the CRM and SRM samples ranging from 80 to 120% as per the

350   Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority guidelines [46]. Total phytosterol content

351   was calculated based on the summation of the identified sterols (i.e. the sum of campesterol,

352   brassicasterol, campestanol, stigmasterol, stigmastanol and β-sitosterol levels). The average

353   recoveries for the spiked milk samples were *ca*. 64, 69 and 80% for the 1×, 2× and 5× LOR samples

354   respectively. This is considered to be satisfactory and the results are as expected for such low-level

355   determinations. The average process recoveries for spiked samples in water were *ca*. 99, 103, and

356   96% for the respective LOR spikes and this indicates the lower recovery from the spiked milk samples

357   was due to matrix interference as shown in Table 3. Overall the MU determined for this method for

358   milk at the 1×LOR value of 0.02 mg/100 mL for the individual sterols was ±35% and for the animal

359   feed at the 1×LOR value of 5.0 mg/100 g, the MU determined was ±15% for results falling within the

360   mid-calibration range. In both cases, a 95% confidence interval was used with a coverage factor of 2.

361   The validation data demonstrated that the method is suitable for the analysis of animal feed and milk

362   for both trace and high-level sterol analysis.

363   **3.6   Analysis of cattle feed**

364   Using the validated method, the total sterol levels in a broad range of animal feeds were

365   analyzed. Three separate samples of each feed type were analyzed with the exception of tannin,

366   molasses and cotton seed oil where a single sample from each was analyzed. The average results of

367   the total sterol contents from each sample are presented in Figure 4. The main sterols found in the

368   feed samples were β-sitosterol, stigmasterol, stigmastanol and campesterol. Overall, the highest total

369   sterol content was found in cotton seed oil and the lowest in tannin, although these were among the

370   test feeds comprised of a single sample only. It was also observed that in both the maize and pasture

371   samples that the sterol content was higher in the silage form. Comparison between literature value of

372   total phytosterols was only possible for the wheat and cotton seed oil as, the rest of the animal feed

373   matrices was not available for direct comparison. The total phytosterols in the wheat sample was

374   comparable to values cited by Ruibal-Mendieta*, et al.* [45], however for cotton seed oil it was 40-50%

375   lower than the values reported by Gül and Amar [47]. The differences between the latter literature

376   reference and that of the present study for cotton seed oil may be due to differences in cotton

377   varieties, seasonal variations, or the age of the samples. The general standard deviation within each

378   feed matrix over different subsamples was ≤25% and given that the subsamples were collected over a

379   course of two years, the results demonstrate that the total sterol content in each matrix was

380   comparable. This suggests that an average result of each matrix can be used to simplify and predict

381   trends associated with feed and sterol content in milk for future studies.

382   **4   Concluding remarks**

383   A method using both acid hydrolysis and saponification was developed in this study to measure

384   total phytosterol levels and was found to be suitable for the analysis of milk and animal feed at trace

385   and naturally occurring levels. An aminopropyl SPE cartridge was found to effectively remove non-

386   targeted analytes from the extract minimizing interference. The method was used to analyse a variety

387   of animal feed types and the highest and lowest total sterol contents were found in cotton seed oil

388   (256 mg/100 g) and tannin (<30 mg/100 g) respectively. Silage samples of pasture and maize had

389   higher sterol content compared to their non-silage counterparts. The average standard deviations for

390   total sterol levels between subsamples with the same feed matrices were ≤25% suggesting a relativity

391   insignificant variation between subsamples. It is therefore recommended that average values can be

392   used to compare trends in sterol contents in milk in future animal feed studies.

393   **Acknowledgements**

396   **Conflict of Interest Statement**

397   The authors declare no conflict of interest.

398   **References**

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509

510   **Figure Captions**

511

512   **Figure 1.** Total sterols extracted from various sample types with different ethanol contents in the acid

513   hydrolysis solution (error bars represent standard deviation between results from the same batch).

514   Notes: (*a) indicates significances within the group for the acid medium with p values <0.5; (*)

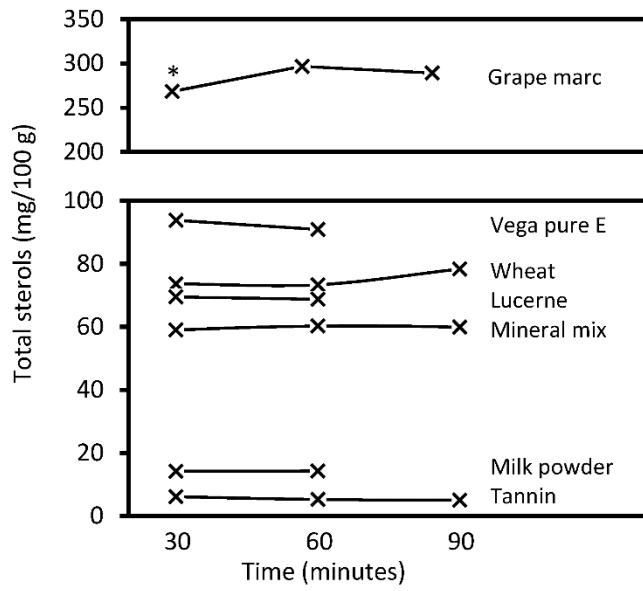515   significant differences were found when compared only to the control (water) within the group.
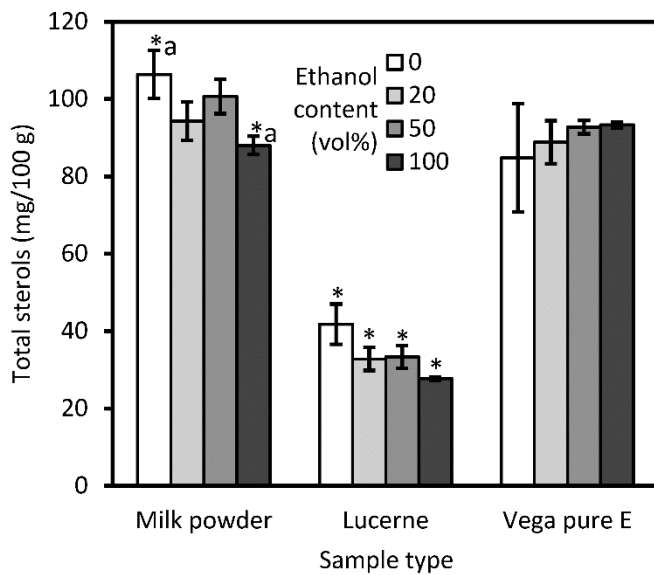
516

517

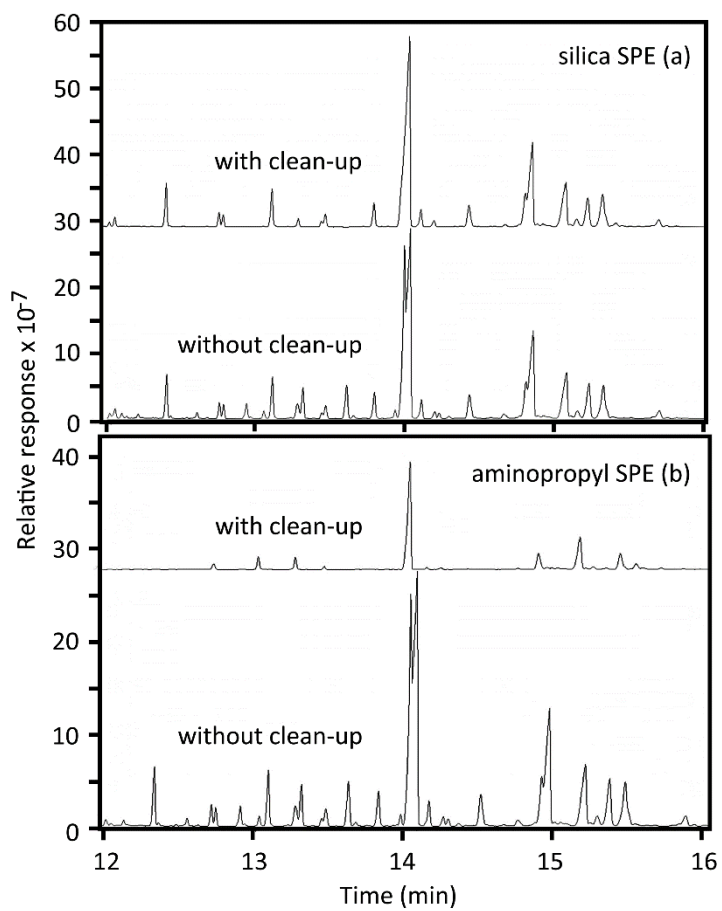518 **Figure 2.** Effect of saponification incubation time on sterol recovery of various feeds. Note: (*)

519 indicates significant differences between data points with p value <0.05.
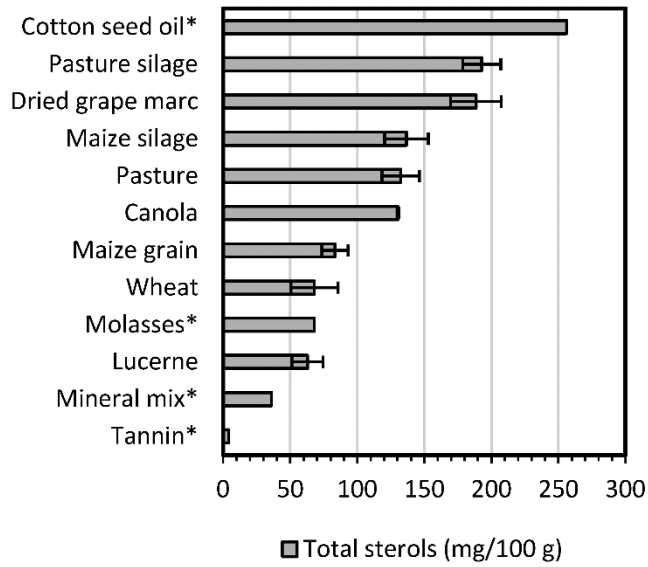

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521

522   **Figure 3.** Chromatogram of lucerne extract using (a) silica SPE cartridge and (b) aminopropyl SPE

523   cartridge.

524

525

526 **Figure 4.** Average total sterols within the same matrices (feed samples marked * were single samples

527 only; error bars represent standard deviation between replicate subsamples). Note the standard

528 deviation within each group was < 25% compared to the overall mean value.

529