
DAIRY COW LAMENESS

Lameness of the foot is part of the triad of troubles that contribute most disease to dairy cattle, along with mastitis and infertility.

The bulk of lameness disease costs are in the reduced chance of conception and greater number of days open. Lameness can reduce conception rate by greater than 25% and increase the risk of ovarian follicular cysts by 2.5 times. If a calving interval is increased through lameness and poor fertility from 420 days to 450 days, this is an extra 30 days open at £5.75 per day, amounting to £170 (DAISY Report, 2002).

With some herds having lameness rates of 40-50%, this is a massive drain on resources. A lame cow increases her chances of being culled six-fold (a fact backed up by the reasons for slaughter on the OTMS Casualty Slaughter certificates). Since chronically lame cows cannot reliably be transported, many farmer clients of XLVets are now reviewing their strategy for tackling the lameness issue. We are seeing a dramatic rise in the number of individual milking and cull cows being treated.

Treating lameness

Treating lame cows is one of the most demanding health issues to be approached on farm, as it is expensive on both time and physical effort. It is therefore very important that efforts are maximised to best effect, i.e. the cost-to-benefit ratio is as low as possible.

Vets often find the best way to investigate lameness is via a holistic approach that includes a herd locomotion score to gauge the severity and extent of the problem.

A simple system of scoring cows is to grade them from 0 through to 3, where 0 is normal and good locomotion and 3 is very lame. Bristol University is running The Healthy Feet Project and on the website: www.cattle-lameness.org.uk there are recording sheets to print off and videos to watch on how to use this scoring system.

Once each cow had been graded, a plan of attack for treating lame cows can be implemented. Grade 3 cows that are very lame, are often treated time and again, by farmer and vet. These cows are broken and will often never become sound. They should still be treated as effectively as possible to maximise their comfort and improve their welfare, but a realistic cap should be put on their treatment costs. If all that is required is a quick corrective trim every 1-2 months then this can be very economical. In our experience this can dramatically increase the longevity of a cow, although she may never be eligible for live off-farm transport.

A far more effective use of resources is to tackle the grade 2 or grade 1 cows, to get them back down to grade 1 or 0, as they can often be cured. One way we have approached this in the past is for the vet to tackle the 3s, and the farmer or qualified lay foot-trimmer to tackle the 2s or 1s. It is preferable if the foot trimmer is registered with the National Association of Cattle Foot-Trimmers (www.nacft.co.uk). It is also important that the reasons for lameness, or any lesions found, are recorded so that progress, deterioration and control points can be identified.

Regular foot trimming

All cows should be hoof-trimmed at least once or ideally twice in lactation, even if they are sound. This way, cows are prevented as much as is possible from advancing up the lameness ladder. Handling equipment and tools must also be of the best affordable quality as this makes a hard job more rewarding. Look at www.wopa.nl for some decent equipment ideas.

The remainder of a holistic approach to lameness does require a thorough review of the whole of the cows' environment, with a major emphasis on housing design and cow track management. This can be reviewed with a good

cattle vet, especially through the CowSignals® approach to buildings and hoof assessment (www.cowsignals.com).

New technologies

New technologies have a very valuable place in the management of lameness. These include computer programs such as InterHerd which can manage information on lameness diagnoses, generate lists of cows due for trimming, and monitor effects on performance and analyse trends in lameness.

Mobile phone technology now allows us to easily transfer photos of lesions on cow feet from farmer to vet, where this would not normally justify a special visit. This could well be extended to longer video clips in the near future, possibly leading to an easy to use library of images to assess progress.

A DVD collaboration between XLVets and NACFT entitled “Cattle Foot Trimming” has recently been launched. This DVD was sponsored by Reaseheath College and is available through Reaseheath's Agricultural Department. Tel: 01270 613271/Email: angelab@reaseheath.ac.uk