

BRITISH DAIRYING

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Health plan benefits highlighted

In a survey of dairy farmers at the Dairy Event and Livestock Show last month the majority—89%—had a herd health plan. But only 65% of them found it a useful document to refer to. XLVets' Richard Knight explains how to make them a valuable tool to improve profits.

In the XLVets survey of the 66 farmers who had a herd health plan, 43—about two-thirds—found it useful whilst 23—a third—did not. Vet Richard Knight, from the Westmorland Veterinary Group in Kendal, says: "Historically, herd health plans have often been used as a means to gain farm assurance. Having one was just another box ticked. It had little influence on farm performance. However, those who have a health plan and, more importantly, also make health planning an ongoing activity with their vet, have found benefits in improved efficiencies.

"For dairy farmers, regular veterinary visits, or formal team meetings with other key farm advisers, provide the opportunity to review good progress, troubleshoot any current problems and assess areas for growth or change. For instance, here at The Westmorland Veterinary Group, we recommend fortnightly veterinary visits, often followed up with quarterly team meetings.

"So I'd recommend to any dairy farmers who only see their vet when there's a specific problem to fire-fight, to think about working more closely with them. I try to encourage my clients to work smarter, not harder, as I figure this is the best way to retain profit and morale on the dairy farm."

Control of infectious diseases

Cattle diseases such as BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis and Johnes' disease will depress health and performance. Of the four, according to the XLVets survey, least action was being taken against Johnes' disease with only 58% of farmers knowing the status of their herd for this infection, and 40% of farmers having no action plan to assess or control it.

"We see levels of Johnes' disease increasing year-on-year within herds and spreading to new herds," says Mr Knight. "The condition is very insidious and was one of the reasons why many of the farmers in our area went into Friesians in the 1940s and 1950s, to



Vet Richard Knight.

breed new family lines and escape from the trap.

"A whole farm approach is required to control the condition, and I worry that if farmers do nothing then we will be in the same situation our forebears were 50 or 60 years ago, with herds riddled with disease and suffering heavy annual losses—economics were a lot better then than they are now."

For BVD, 86% of farmers knew their herd status, and 70% were vaccinating against it. However no one was planning to identify

the animals persistently infected with BVD virus and remove them from the herd, to completely eradicate it. "This approach, together with a herd vaccination policy and a risk-based biosecurity plan, is the optimum for herd health and performance, and is considered best practice."

The herd Leptospirosis status was known to 78% of farmers surveyed, with 60% vaccinating against it. Awareness of IBR infection was only slightly lower at 74% and vaccination at 38%. However, one in four farmers were monitoring for IBR, and a third were keeping an eye on Johnes' disease levels.

Measuring herd health status

The survey also tested farmers on their awareness of the warning signs for several health issues.

When asked what the ideal ratio of milk fat to milk protein should be in early lactation, 88% said 1.5 was too high. "Yes, a ratio greater than 1.5 could indicate that the cow is in negative energy balance (NEB) by virtue of the reduced protein component," says

Mr Knight. "Often we see excessively fat cows in NEB too, with the fat content of the milk raised over 6%, thus increasing the ratio. A note of caution though, these figures can be erroneous when milk recording is factored—I would urge anyone who wishes to regularly use this valuable information to stop factoring for the time being. This information is an aide to accurate on-farm assessment of the nutrition of the cows and is not diagnostic on its own. Tackling NEB issues is pivotal in managing the future fertility, production and longevity of

your cows."

"However, it's important not to swing too far the other way—a milk fat to milk protein ratio of less than 1.0 can be correlated to rumenal acidosis, by virtue of the reducing milk fat component, through reduced synthesis of acetate, butyrate and C16 fatty acids in the acidic rumen."

"Milk records are a powerful, cost-effective tool to monitor herd performance and provide a lot of useful information on which to evaluate health," he advises. "Also, they can be used to monitor the success or otherwise of any changes in herd management.

"To assess the impact of mastitis, it is more enlightening from a veterinary health perspective to calculate both the number of cow cases and also the new and recurrent quarter cases of mastitis. Having determined the incidence, active health planning involves putting measures into practice to reduce manageable hazards predisposing to mastitis, given the circumstances and opportunities on the farm. Of those surveyed, 96% agreed that 75 new quarter cases per 100 cows per year was too high. With my farm clients, 40 is an achievable target, with the very best in the 20s.

"Similarly 40% of farmers thought a lameness score of 2 or more for 40% of the herd was too high—but how many herds are actually scored for locomotion and hence assessed for lameness? Again, this is something which can be done by farm staff after consultation with their vet to agree a scoring system.

"The results can then be used as a benchmark to compare the success of any changes made such as footbathing or more frequent foot-trimming.

"Pro-active health planning is key to improving herd health and profitability. This will involve the farmer and his vet, as well as other valued advisory sources such as nutritionists, farm consultants, breeding companies and foot-trimmers," concludes Mr Knight.



Locomotion scoring gives a benchmark against which to measure reductions in lameness from changes in management such as more frequent foot-trimming.