Don’t all cows walk like that?

An AWF Case Study

ANIMAL WELFARE FOUNDATION

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A CASE ABOUT THE ROLE OF FARM ASSURANCE SCHEMES AND VETERINARY ADVICE.

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Don’t all cows walk like that?

A fairly conventional 150 cow dairy unit with Holstein-Friesian cows, housed over winter in cubicle housing, has been visited by their farm assurance inspector who has raised a “non-compliance” for failure to adhere to the following standard:

“A pro-active approach must be taken to livestock health management demonstrated by a written health plan which must be established, implemented and reviewed regularly according to circumstances.” (DR.AH.3)

The assurance assessor has told the farmer that more than 40% of his cows are lame and his health plan only has a generic statement about foot bathing his cows with antibiotics when he has a problem.

The farmer has phoned you to complain about the veterinary health plan being inadequate and to suggest that there is nothing wrong with his cows.

What should you do? (continue for answers)

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- The cows

Previous studies have shown that herd prevalence can range from 0% to over 50% with the national mean being around 25%. Lameness is a painful condition that affects all of the 5 freedoms. Lameness can be caused by several different conditions especially Sole Ulcers, White Line disease, Digital Dermatitis and Foul in the Foot. Each condition has several risk factors.

- The farmer

Previous studies have suggested that farmers only recognise 1 out of 4 lame cows i.e. usually only Dairy Co score 3 severely lame cows. Even though lameness does affect profitability (average cost £150 per case) many farmers do not appreciate/believe these "hidden costs" which are associated with increased culling, treatment cost, reduced milk yield and decreased fertility.

- The Vet

Health planning is a management tool that should be "owned" by the farmer. The vet should assist the farmer in the health planning process but they should not take responsibility away from the farmer for the development of plans or monitoring.

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

"constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care." RCVS declaration

"Make animal welfare your first consideration in seeking to provide the most appropriate attention for animals committed to your care." RCVS GPC

Farmers must ensure animals receive effective treatment under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006 s. 4** (unnecessary suffering) and **s. 9** (duty of care). Farmers need to be familiar with the **DEFRA Welfare Code for Cattle**. This is a requirement under the **Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007**. Health planning is a requirement of all farm assurance schemes and is included within DEFRA welfare codes. The emphasis should be on proactive, farm-specific planning rather than bureaucratic plans that have no value. The key steps for health planning are: **Farm history & goals, Health policies and protocols, Measurement, Management** and **Monitoring**.

The DairyCo mobility score , provides the industry standard protocol for assessing lameness. It also includes suggested actions for individual cows, for each score. Best practice management of lameness at a herd level would include the following steps:

- diagnosis of the main lesion types,
- farm specific risk assessment,
- development of action plan to address risks,
- on-going monitoring programme, such as monthly lameness scoring.

Details of these steps can be found at The Healthy Feet Project .

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What could be done in practice?

Best practice management for lameness is described above. However, farmers are unlikely to adopt such practice if the veterinary surgeon simply provides their advice in “traditional advisory style”.

Veterinary surgeons need to adapt their communication style to include a more facilitatory approach. For example the following tactics used in the Healthy Feet Project may be useful:

- Recognizing the Benefits and Barriers to Change - Farmers are more likely to take action if they perceive benefits, although this change may be limited by any perceived barriers.
- Facilitating Farmers to Plan Their Own Changes - Farmers are more likely to implement changes in management or routine that result from their own ideas i.e. a “farmer-owned approach”. A good facilitator will not provide unsolicited advice, i.e. they will not tell the farmer what to do.
- Establishing Lameness Prevention Activities as a Normal Behaviour or “Norm” - Farmers are more likely to change behaviour if they know others have done the same. Establishing “norms” is the process for reassuring farmers that others are also making changes i.e. that it is normal behaviour to make changes to reduce lameness.
- Encouraging Commitment to the Project - Commitment is the key for sustaining behaviour change.
- Providing Prompts as Reminders to Implement New Activities - Prompts act to remind people of agreed activities and help sustain the new behaviour.

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What could be done in policy?

FAWC recently produced an Opinion on the welfare of dairy cows which included the following recommendations:

- The British dairy industry should aim to raise the standard of welfare of dairy cows over the next five years.
- The British dairy industry should invest more in education, skills, training and professional development of farmers and stockmen.
- Breeding programmes used by British dairy farmers should place more emphasis on welfare traits, resulting in a cow that is better able to deal with the demands of modern dairying. Breeding programmes should aim to improve health and welfare rather than merely to halt their decline.
- The incidence of endemic diseases in dairy cows, particularly mastitis and lameness, should be reduced urgently.

With respect to lameness FAWC commented that:

- One reason for the slow progress in dealing with lameness is the farmer's perception of the problem. Work at the University of Bristol has shown that informing farmers about the prevalence of lameness within their herd and providing external advice often fails to stimulate the farmer to take preventive action.
- The dairy industry is encouraging farmers to score their cows' mobility using a standard method. Some retail buyers now provide a financial incentive by demanding that farmers score mobility as part of their supply contract.
- Penalising farmers financially for cow lameness is a more radical approach that is used in Holland. There, the national quality assurance programme requires that milk from severely lame cows is kept out of the milk tank. The penalty is based on an interpretation of an EC regulation (EC 853/2004) that requires milk to come from cows in a "good state of health". In Britain, the Government or farm assurance bodies could also interpret legislation in a similar fashion.

About AWF

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The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) aims to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals including working and livestock animals, wildlife, and pets. We do this by focusing out charitable activities on three main areas:

Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice

- Research
- Debate
- Education

Grant funding research which has a direct impact on animal welfare.

Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues

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