



NEW THINKING NEEDED TO IMPROVE FOOT HEALTH

The findings of the UK's largest survey of dairy cow mobility and foot health highlights there is still a significant opportunity to reduce the economic, welfare, social and environmental consequences of compromised mobility. But to make the most of the opportunity will require a clearer focus and new thinking.

The survey was commissioned by Stride, a not-for-profit industry initiative headed up by industry partners Ceva, HerdVision, IVC Farm Vets, Neogen and Zinpro. Over 350 dairy farmers completed the survey this spring, allowing the most detailed picture of foot health to be produced.

Announcing the results dairy vet Matt Dobbs, chair of the Stride Technical Board, comments that mobility issues have remained stubbornly high for many years. "While we have seen sustained reductions in cell counts, the same is not true for improvements in foot health. In part this is due to the milk price incentives on offer for achieving low cell counts, but it also reflects the complex and multi-factorial nature of compromised mobility".

The survey shows that compromised foot health is an issue for all farm sizes and management systems and that there is a variable uptake in the preventative measures

available. All the major causes of poor foot health – digital dermatitis, sole ulcers, foul, and overgrown claws remain issues on farm.

“While businesses know the key components of a preventative programme such as mobility scoring, foot trimming and foot bathing, the uptake across respondents was variable suggesting it should be possible to improve management. The survey highlighted that a key contributor to this could be inadequate delegation of responsibility, especially where a range of farm staff and external specialists are involved. Clear communication and a lack of protocols can also be an issue.”

The report also highlights that there may be a degree of under-estimating the consequential cost of a case of poor foot health. “Respondents generally feel foot health has a small impact on profitability, possibly because incurred direct costs are only a small part of the total, with the majority being lost production, which is rarely measured.

“Better reporting of the real costs could provide a motivation to manage the condition more aggressively. However, it is important to understand that for many people involved with foot health on farm, cost is not actually the prime concern. For someone milking cows, the problems caused by poor foot health are more practical, such as extended time getting cows in for milking, or the time spent treating problem animals. Alternatively it could be something as simple as having pride in the herd.

“To begin the drive to reduced levels of foot issues, the industry needs to work more closely to help dairy farmers and their teams and advisors develop more comprehensive preventative strategies. Key to this will be clearer allocation of responsibilities, improved skills development, better appreciation of the consequences and benefits and embracing the new technologies that can make a difference on farm,” Mr Dobbs concludes.

A full copy of the report can be downloaded at www.stridemobility.co.uk/surveyresults

Producers can hear the results from the Stride survey themselves and engage in a series of practical workshops focussing on improving mobility, at one of the Stride farm events this summer. Details of the events can be found here [include the QR code].

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