

Mobility gains momentum

Tools and schemes take producers into the mobility fast lane

June's CowManagement reported on the true extent of lameness in our dairy herds and stressed the need for greater strides to be taken to improve mobility. We now look at a number of initiatives already underway – led by vets, producers and retailers.

Improving mobility and minimising lameness is high on the agenda. Retailers are keen to demonstrate that the milk they sell is produced to the highest welfare standards and animal welfare organisations are keen to see improvements in key determinants of welfare, such as the level of lameness on dairy farms. But above all, the effect of lameness on yield, fertility and culling provides producers with enough reasons to take action to make improvements.

The linchpin of improved mobility is monitoring and NMR's Mobility Monitor is leading the way, according to Bristol University vet Nick Bell. He's been using mobility scoring extensively in the Tubney Charitable Trust's Healthy Feet Project. This project has been running since 2006 and encourages, through its website, group meetings and one-to-one visits from the team at Bristol, all those involved in cow management – vets, advisers, producers and foot trimmers – to work together to reduce lameness.

"We all know the principles of lameness control," says Dr Bell. "The task is working out what is practical on farm."

Dr Bell stresses how important it is to build up a profile of the cow and the herd and the impact that changes make. "We've had records that provide profiles and trends for fertility and mastitis for some time and fortunately, by working hard with NMR, we now have something for lameness – Mobility Monitor is a superb starting point."

Sticking to the nationally approved scoring system developed by DairyCo, NMR has added features to Mobility Monitor and these were presented to Arla and Wiseman producers supplying Tesco at a series of workshops this spring.

Mobility trends

The improved Mobility Monitor can record and analyse data more thoroughly and it can then be used to monitor trends and improve management.

Free of charge, users still print off the Mobility Monitor template from the Herd Companion website with a list of cows in their herd and their mobility history, but data entry has been simplified and there are options to record parity number and month of lactation. Mobility Monitor uses this information in improved analyses, as shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

"The whole process of mobility scoring gives our producers a positive plan of action," says dairy manager and co-ordinator of the Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group Emma Rutter. "Producers see cows every day and it's hard to see the more sub-clinical signs of lameness. But by scoring a cow say six times a year there is some tangible data to monitor and record trends."

Mobility and lameness were identified as one of the key priorities by the Tesco Dairy Group when it looked at factors that would impact on consumers and on herd efficiency. "It was a two-pronged approach," says vet and consultant to the group Matt Dobbs. "We wanted to concentrate on both the consumer issues and aspects that would improve farm performance. Mobility was high on the list."

"While obvious lame cows were being dealt with, the more subtle cases of lameness – which generally account for 75% of lameness cases – were going

unnoticed. These were cases that could develop into bigger problems, but at best they may well be affecting fertility and yield," he adds.

Promising results

The first series of meetings in 2008 were geared to making producers aware of the lameness problem and encouraging them to mobility score. "We generated a lot of interest and producers were very enthusiastic. This latest series of meetings have been very practical. We've looked at footbaths, building design and cow tracks in particular. Producers are getting more committed to improving mobility and we're seeing promising results," says Mr Dobbs.

And other retailers are taking a proactive approach to cow health and welfare issues. ASDA is focussed on benchmarks based on recorded data and looking at targets. "We highlight the hidden costs," says ASDA's Chris Brown.

Although not compulsory, around 20% of its suppliers have joined ASDA's recently introduced health monitoring scheme, which is broad but comprehensive. "It is providing us with vital benchmark figures and we can monitor trends."

And collecting more data is high on the agenda in the Healthy Feet Project with lesion data being collected by NMR from a sample group of producers. "In other



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Figure 1: Percentage of each group by parity

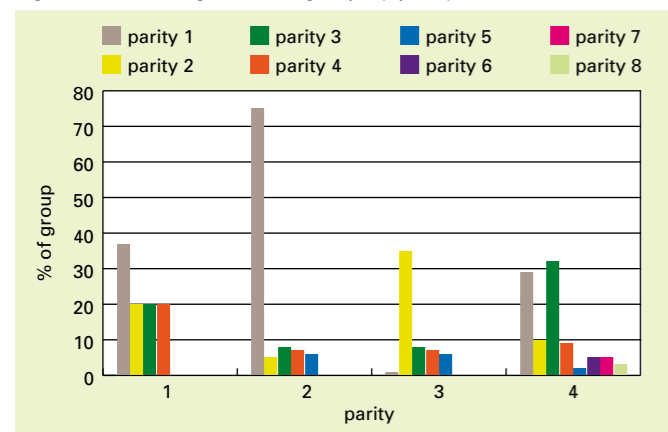


Figure 2: Percentage of lame cows in each parity

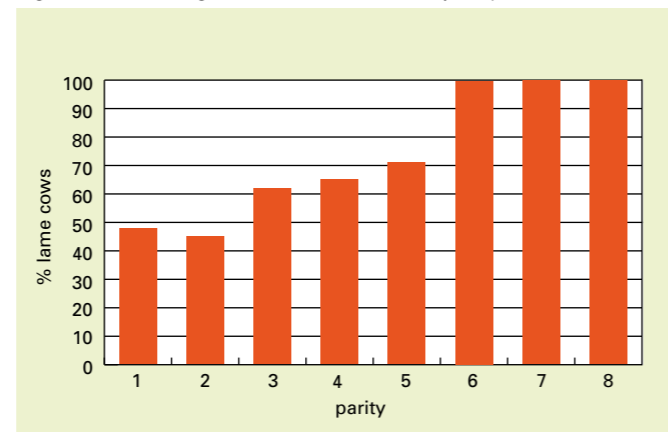
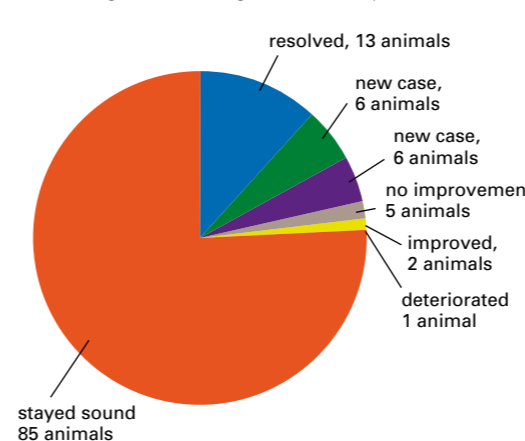


Figure 3: Changes in mobility scores



countries data from foot trimmers is used as part of the mobility monitoring and is found to be highly reliable," explains Nick Bell. "Mobility records will highlight cows prone to lameness. More information on the actual problems – which lesion or disease is causing the problem – will help to direct us to the cause."

Data challenge

"The challenge is ensuring that producers have good data quality and the appropriate details so the on farm team can improve the areas that are

seen to be causing the problems," Nick Bell adds.

According to data, treated cases of lameness are estimated to cost from £80 for digital dermatitis to £324 for sole ulcers. "Regular scoring combined with effective treatment could save significant costs," says Matt Dobbs. "And if a protocol is followed then a reasonable target would be a halving in the number of severe cases of lameness and a significant reduction in the more subtle cases."

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