Digital Dermatitis

Digital Dermatitis is an ever increasing problem in many dairy herds and is becoming more significant as a cause of lameness in beef cattle. This doesn’t come as much of a surprise when we consider how the disease arises.

As with all infectious diseases the amount of disease seen in any individual or group is dependent on the balance between the level of challenge faced and the ability to fight off that challenge.

When we think of DD the challenge is basically slurry which enables the bacterial populations responsible for DD to survive and gain entry to the skin. The better we can control slurry on farm and keep it away from cows’ feet then the lower the risk of DD.

Obviously this is not necessarily straightforward especially during the housed period but there are things you can do. Target areas where slurry sits in pools and ensure these are kept clear with thorough scraping and concrete repair as required. Avoid making cows walk through deep areas of slurry which are often found at the end of scraper runs and around gateways and outside water troughs.

In addition we can try to keep cows’ feet clean and the bacterial load reduced by regular foot bathing. In general farms which have got DD well under control have achieved this with strict foot bathing regimes. In most scenarios achieving decent results at controlling DD you will need to foot bath for at least 3 days per week and in reality the herds with least DD foot bath 5 or more days a week. This may sound like a lot of hassle but it is easier than picking up lame feet to trim, scrub and spray them. Speak to one of the vets for specific advice about the best foot bathing regime in your herd.

There are lots of baths and a multitude of products available but it doesn’t need to be expensive or complicated to be effective.
Heat Detection

The success of any breeding program is a factor of the number of females bred and the conception rate of those females. Females which are not bred do not conceive, this is a basic biological principle and throughout history there has only been one exception to this rule which you can read about in the Gospels. Your cows are not exempt from this biological rule although occasionally the bull does wander and we find surprises!

The heat detection rate (HDR) or submission rate is the number of animals bred divided by the number of eligible cows over a 3 week period. Animals become eligible after the voluntary waiting period and remain eligible until they fall pregnant. Figures from NMR show that if you detect 43% of the eligible cows in heat in your herd in any 3 week period you are in the top 25% of UK herds for heat detection even though you didn’t see half the heat! We work with a number of very successful farms which use dedicated technicians to manage their reproduction programs and even in these herds heat detection rates run at 60-70% in general. Are we really that bad at seeing cows in heat? The following points all contribute in varying amounts to your HDR.

• Cows are showing less obvious signs and exhibit those signs for a shorter period than they used to, this is the result of only breeding for milk yield over a long number of years.
• There are fewer people on farm and those who are on farm are too busy to look for bulling cows.
• Some cows are not cycling due to being in anoestrus or having persistent follicular structures i.e. cystic ovaries or other pathology.
• Some cows have a natural cycle which is more than 21 days so they mess up the stats.
• Some cows suffer late embryonic loss which means they were pregnant but lose the pregnancy and come back in heat after more than 21 days.
• Not all services are reported to the nice people at NMR if the cow has had 2 inseminations since the last milk recording.

The first thing to establish is how well you are doing currently. If you’re not sure then ask your vet to help, it’s the least we can do! It’s certainly worth investigating as there are lots of things you can do to improve your HDR which we will also be glad to advise you on what is most suitable for your situation. The options include:

• 3 week diaries to identify cows due to be on.
• Tail paints or chalks, refresh daily and look for signs of disturbance or rubbing.
• Kamars.
• Activity monitoring systems using collars or pedometers.
• Teaser bulls.
• Synchronisation programs and fixed time insemination.

The process of semen production takes around 60 days so a bit of forward planning is required if you want to test your stock and have time to make changes before the breeding period starts. Around 20% of bulls tested are either in-fertile or sub-fertile and some reports claim a similar percentage of rams have problems too. We offer a full breeding soundness examination for bull and rams. This includes a thorough physical examination, examination of the reproductive organs and collection and assessment of semen. This allows us to give a complete picture of the breeding prospects of your chosen sires. We recommend testing 8-10 weeks before you plan to start breeding as this allows enough time to make contingency plans if you discover a faulty bull or ram, with the odds of sub-fertility being 1 in 5 can you afford not to check you stock?

Calling all sheep farmers!

We are considering offering our ovine clients the opportunity of new services such as:

• Shearing
• Dipping

If you feel that you would benefit from any of the services above please register your interest by calling the office on 01565 723036