

# Pre-season training

## Tommy Heffernan MVB gradcertDHH, Nuffield International Farming Scholarship award recipient, outlines why the drying-off period is so important

In any sport, pre-season training can be key to a successful season. I often equate the dry period in the cow to this. What she does in the dry period influences how productive she is in the coming lactation. Not only that, it can influence her getting through the lactation. There are so many opportunities for vets to be involved in decision-making at this critical time. There is also the advantage that, often it is a quieter time in both the yearly calendar of the farmer and the vet.

### DRYING OFF!

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is now front and centre as one of the biggest challenges facing animal and human medicine. There will be many political and legislative decisions made that will force change on the ground. My opinion is selective dry-cow therapy (SDCT) will be made compulsory in the not-so-distant future? Are our farms ready for this and are we?

The powers that be will have to reduce population concentration units (PCU) across farming sectors. The low-lying fruit to achieve this, is in areas like blanket dry-cow therapy. A pillar of the five-point mastitis plan for over 50 years. Changing this will create uncertainty and, inevitably, the fear that comes with any change in routines and behaviour.

I started practising SDCT with clients about four years ago with good results. I carefully selected the first clients and stuck rigidly to parameters or key performance indicators (KPIs) necessary to implement it successfully. In fact, I went well below the criteria at the time. This was to ease my own anxiety about success or failure.

The criteria for SDCT are well-established, however, looking at recent research conducted by Animal Health Ireland (AHI), this might change as we increase our knowledge and learn more.

As a starting point I use:

- A rolling herd somatic cell count (HSCC) of less than 150,000 for the year. Industry standard is set at 200,000.
- The herd must be engaged in milk recording, no one likes playing darts in the dark. Having a milk recording close to drying off is very valuable.
- Cow heifers under 80,000 in SCC readings for lactation should receive sealer only (year 1).
- Clinical mastitis needs to be recorded, with any animal having a case of clinical mastitis in the previous three to four months receiving an antibiotic dry cow therapy (ADCT).
- Culture of bulk milk and six to eight high SCC cows done. This allows to isolate pathogens and make better therapeutic decisions. Where *Streptococcus agalactiae* is isolated, regardless of the other parameters, blanket dry cow therapy should be carried

out. With culturing and sensitivity, this has allowed us to make more informed decisions about ADCT.

- Review drying-off procedure – all cows to receive teat sealer and surgical asepsis used in this technique. This is important, where teat sealers are only being used, a key area for vets to be involved in training.
- Further to this, teat ends could be checked at drying off, any damage would necessitate ADCT to reduce the risk in these cases.

I incorporated this into my dry-cow audits with clients and it worked for me. This was targeted at early adopters and influencers. This was charged out as a service for an hourly rate. We moved on to talk about the housing environment and its role in mastitis intramammary infections (IMIs) and cow comfort.

### ENCOURAGING VET CONSULTATION

How often have we seen this in articles related to SDCT that some farmers will consult their vet and others just won't? We must claim a certain amount of responsibility in this area and reach out to clients as the experts in guiding them through

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any change on-farm with the use of medicines. Whether this is lip service or not, vets are the key custodians of welfare and health on farms.

So, it is our responsibility to ensure we play this role and get paid for our time and involvement.

Of course, this was not a one-fits-all model, but it allowed me to deliver a service-based model that had the potential to evolve and grow.

#### DRY-COW AUDITS

Four years ago, I also started doing dry-cow audits with a number of clients. These were the catalysts to change the way I thought about the service-based model for veterinary practice forever. Having cow-signals training really helped me evolve my thinking.

There was also an extraordinary shift in the relationship with my clients and working with them to help performance and profit. It was simple system, again based on-farm, where the key focus, unknowingly at the time, was enhancing performance. I measured a number of parameters during the dry period that were going to affect performance in the critical-transition period, lactation and even fertility.

I did an early and late dry-cow audit. On leaving practice, I had signed up 15% of my dairy clients to one or both of these audits.

Cow signals is about understanding what the cow needs

naturally and trying to replicate this in the housed period. So, this was the first area I looked at measuring what is termed as cow comfort. Most disasters in the transition period occur where we push cows beyond their natural physiological boundaries.

#### WHAT DID I DO NEXT?

I created a simple scale (1-10) in a range of areas. I made lots of mistakes by overcomplicating the process and trying to change too much. I learned to pick three main things between visits and focus on them, in order of priority. The system changed over time and some of the cow signals we covered was training meaning the farmer upskilled over time. We looked at cubicle size, numbers, cow comfort and particularly, unexplained notifiable observations (UNOs):

- Body Condition Score (BCS);
- Water;
- Feedspace;
- Feed levels and feed values;
- Silage mineral analysis and percentage of dry-cow's mineral bloods;
- Urine pH in close-up dry cows;
- BHBs in hand-held meter to check percentage of thin cows;
- Relevant diagnostics if present example bulk tank milk (BTM) tests; and

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- Reviewed parasite control and vaccinations. I then adapted the system to allow flexibility where it was needed for particular problems. People can't build new sheds and often economics allows minimal changes to feeding and infrastructure. However, small incremental investments can still see returns. Small wins also create confidence in the system, allowing more buyback.

Like everyone, I've had good days and bad days in practice. One thing I am proud of, is the time and effort I invested into developing these audits because it transformed my thinking forever, as regards how I viewed performance and health management on farms.

### ACKNOWLEDGING MISTAKES

- I tried to change and influence people who weren't invested in the programmes. You need to pick clients with the right mindset to this approach.
- I had good records but poor reporting. Where I did write up reports, they became long and time-consuming. I moved to a simple system of three actions, less writing and more focus.
- I didn't have the confidence to charge more for the service. When done correctly, this will reap significant economic returns for your client.
- I did not undertake enough production measurements to truly measure the effect of this auditing approach.
- I called them audits, in hindsight there are 'sexier' words for doing this type of approach. I discovered the word 'performance' later on.

### THE GREATEST LESSONS LEARNED

You have to start. If you wait until you have more knowledge, time, etc... you will never start.

Understanding farming is about understanding the farmers' behaviours, attitudes and criteria for decision-making. Vets should step into their wellingtons and see how they view the world. It will be a very rewarding way of working with your clients.

Be patient, you can't change the world in a hurry. It is a culmination of small victories with some losses along the way. The greatest skill in your toolbox is effective communication (yes it can be learnt). Simplicity is key, pick the battle you can win.

My eyes and ears were the greatest diagnostic tools I had in my jeep, I just needed to use them more. When doing something different, you will meet opposition and criticism. You must persist through listening to feedback and learn, but never lose sight of the finishing line!

The landscape of farming and agriculture is rapidly changing. It is a noisy world full of technical soundbites and advice. For me, the vet can be the filter, guide and the educator for farming of the future! A good place to start is in the pre-season.

