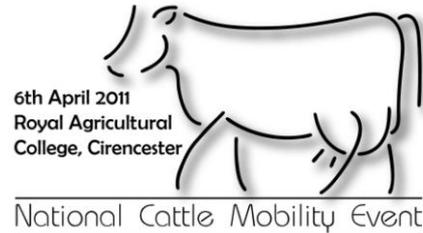


Cow Behaviour, Human Behaviour and Cow Flow

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Over 20 years ago patience (or impatience) was identified as a significant risk factor among the many risk factors leading to physical lameness in dairy cattle in New Zealand. This led to further studies to try and understand why the behaviour of herdsmen (i.e. impatience) could result in foot damage. During these observations many aspects of cow behaviour affecting cow flow became apparent.

Poor cow flow through the milking parlour is frustrating to staff. This frustration, if expressed, further affects cow flow. If frustrated, impatient staff leave the pit to force cows to move faster into the bails, one possible result is foot damage. Other negative outcomes could be lower production, more mastitis, dissatisfied staff and accidents.

Good cow flow through a milking parlour is dependant on many factors. These factors include parlour design, cow training, and human behaviour. Understanding what is safe and good for a cow will help in parlour design. Sometimes small changes to a milking parlour or the way it is used can result in improvements in cow flow.

A basic understanding of stockmanship will also help. Cows are creatures of habit and if trained properly will flow surprisingly well even when the facilities are not perfect. It takes a lot of determination to achieve consistent good cow flow. However, it doesn't take much to upset good cow flow. Even a relatively minor change in routine can upset cow flow. Often the poor cow flow is a mystery to the herdsmen because of lack of understanding of cow behaviour, and of what is normal and comfortable for a cow.

Changes of staff, changes in roles, changes in the way cows are called into the milking parlour can all result in a reluctance of some cows to enter the milking bails. If staff understand cow behaviour and respond accordingly, the problem will quickly resolve itself. If staff respond with frustration the problem will get worse.

Every milking must be an exercise in contentment and must be seen as a positive training session. Negative training will take time to correct – so early identification of the problem is important.

10 herds were observed on 15 occasions during one lactation from when they were gathered at the pasture before walking to the milking parlour, throughout the milking process and until the last cow had returned to the paddock.

The first observation was that cows entered the waiting yard in a fairly ordered position, but many cows left the milking parlour in a changed order. Often cows from the rear of the collecting yard would move through the entire herd to be milked early in the process.

If the cows were lightly compacted, the cows could more easily change position from an arrival position to a milking position. If the herd was forced into the collecting yard they would also push through the herd in an attempt to change position but with a greater chance of foot damage.