

Spot-lift-look – improving herd mobility by treating lame cows: does it work?

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A major challenge for any farm looking to limit the impact of lameness is spotting cases early. We know that lesions like sole ulcers take many weeks to develop, during which time cows are walking abnormally. However, because cows are good at concealing pain from would-be predators, they frequently go unnoticed until infection sets in. By this stage welfare is compromised, productivity affected and her feet are unlikely ever to be normal again.

Thanks to the DairyCo mobility score, there is a simple tool for detecting the early stages of lameness earlier than is usually achievable by general inspection. No doubt as technology improves, this will be replaced by superior automated systems with screening at every milking. Until that time, mobility scoring by farm staff looks a very cost effective practice.

In order to help quantify the benefit of mobility scoring we conducted a study at Bristol University looking at cow mobility in cows monitored and not. As expected, most cows with the early signs of lameness were not prioritized by farm staff. Those cows spotted and treated using mobility scoring had superior cure rates and longer periods until they required re-trimming. However, the approach does rely on having treatment protocols tailored to the level of staff foot trimming skill to avoid accidental over-trimming.

Preliminary findings would suggest:

- The “early threshold treatment” cows enjoyed a more RAPID recovery
- As well as a more SUSTAINED recovery
- A SHORTER duration of lameness
- A SHORTER delay before treatment
- The diagnosis of milder lesions, preventing further development and
- Greater treatment efficacy and efficiency with fewer repeats

Cure rates were not 100% and so records should be used to identify measures to prevent lameness

Practical experience implementing mobility scoring programmes suggest they can be feasible and effective to implement, and the figures are very effective at determining better prevention. However, experience would also indicate dealing with the initial flood of cows for trimming is a major challenge followed by sustaining the interest when levels appear to have fallen. Some case examples will be briefly presented.

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