

Vets, herd health and 'cow advocates'

THE BCVA congress at Telford in November had three sessions of papers running simultaneously for three days plus two sessions of workshops each day.

Some papers were presented by recognisable international speakers who have spent years investigating and researching; while a neighbouring session involved members of

veterinary practices that have developed ways of working which incorporate the known science but are under continuous development.

Presentations about applying the science evoked considerable discussion, both during the session and afterwards.

An advanced use of technology was presented by Jon Reader of Synergy Farm Health, within the title: *Mobilising practice data to meet industry demands*. Each vet within a practice utilises a "ruggedized" laptop computer to apply Herd Keeper. Drop it, step on it, immerse it in water or excreta and it still functions.

Andrew Cobner chaired the session and he has had direct experience of the tool as part of the TB Master initiative. On-farm data can be added and by the magic of the airways updated.

The history of the cow and the herd, any treatments or actions, additional information and observations are on tap. Antimicrobial usage is particularly highlighted. Foot trimmers also use the program and refer cows for a veterinary surgeon review.

Alan King, Andrew Davies and Simon Robertson presented various aspects of Herd Keeper, demonstrating their particular interest and input. Analysis within and across herds is available and one gem was that 50% of mobility scores stay the same over two weeks and 50% do not.

There is the option of an area disease map from disease surveillance. Set the parameters and show where the local diseases are located. A now familiar red, orange and green traffic light graphic indicates the progress or otherwise with dates of test data results.

There was mention during discussion of a Smart phone app but for more information visit www.herdkeeper.com. It is said that use of this veterinary practice analysis program will change the way veterinary

surgeons do business.

The value of observing animals and then discussing the results with the farmer was highlighted by David Main from the University of Bristol. AssureWell is a collaborative project with the RSPCA and the Soil Association to develop a formalised and structured approach for welfare outcomes to be included into

RICHARD GARD
in his second report on the 2012 congress of the British Cattle Veterinary Association covers the presentations on herd health programmes and the gathering of on-farm data



assurance schemes.

Outcome scoring as a management tool has been tested and found to drive farmers towards people who can give advice. Underlying the approach is the ability to promote best practice even though the farmer does not perceive a problem.

Veterinary surgeons are invited to engage with the assessment of welfare outcomes and to become positively involved, with communication between veterinary surgeons and their clients being so important.

Three-hour assessment

One of the developing areas involves Red Tractor Assurance (RTA) and the Dairy Scheme involves a three-hour assessment every 18 months. Derek Kennedy of RTA and Oli Hodgkinson of Trefaldwyn Vets explained that the integrity of the farm assessment involves more time looking at the stock.

There is a mix of producer scoring and assessor examination of groups of animals. It is a requirement of the scheme that an annual review takes place with the herd veterinary practice to update the herd health plan.

An HHP template is available to download at www.redtractorassurance.co.uk: it is free to use and can have the practice logo incorporated. Reviews, records, practical measures, welfare improvements, mobility scores, body condition, leg and foot lesions, cleanliness, mastitis, culling, calf and heifer survivability and how the animals respond to the stockman are all included in the assessment. A full check-list is available from the website.

The Tesco livestock code of practice (LCOP) is to be taken up by the 720 Tesco Sustainable Dairy Group of farmers, who supply all Tesco-branded milk and cream. Rob Smith of the University of Liverpool pointed out that the farmers may

adopt whatever methods they wish so long as the outcomes are achieved.

Once data are collected, farmers will be able to benchmark their performance. It is intended to reward those who consistently perform to the highest levels. Outcome measures are produced from on-farm scoring, milk recording and cattle tracing data with cow and calf survival included as indicators of the management of health.

Full details of the measures are included in *Cattle Practice* (volume 20) and the point is raised whether stimulating improvements in animal welfare is really the job of a supermarket. Clearly, Tesco considers that its customers have an expectation that high standards have been applied within the supply chain. Veterinary input is seen as highly important.

Unsurprisingly, there were views and discussions in other sessions with analysis and critical examination. Martin Green of the University of Nottingham and Jonathan Statham of the Bishopton Veterinary Group considered that Herd Health is the future for farm vets.

They placed emphasis on a continuous process with regular contact between the farmer and the vet with a methodological evaluation of data. Farm-specific goals incorporate the aspirations of the client with measurement of current performance, setting targets and re-evaluating.

The veterinary surgeon is seen as the central co-ordinator and facilitator of change and to fulfill this requires an understanding of human behaviour.

Time has to be allowed for assessment of data and discussion and there needs to be clear, transparent charging arrangements, whether a fixed fee, time charged or based on herd production. It may be that some clients prefer a reduction in medicine prices as part of the Herd Health programme.

Underpinning the whole enterprise is a veterinary team approach. This includes all the relevant practice

personnel, which will mean training opportunities for both staff and clients.

Mike Kirby from Castle Cary and Jennifer Hall from St Davids reviewed some of the barriers to the uptake and success of Herd Health. Lack of awareness of disease, lack of staff and lack of time were major aspects.

Change in relationship

Where the practice has not charged the client for advice in the past there has to be a change in the relationship between the practice and the farmer and this change can inhibit uptake at the first stage. The economic benefit for the farmer of developing and operating a Herd Health Plan is not a good driver. Pride in the farm is important as are the external appearance of the cows and the herd. Practical advice resulting from the elements of the plan is highly valued.

It was left to Chris Hudson and James Breen from the University of Nottingham to consider the practical implementation of Herd Health on the farm and ask the question, "What does it look like?"

The plan is incorporated into the routine visit with 20 minutes in the farm office. This time is spent looking at the farm data and discussing what is known. A major point is that this is a discussion and not a lecture and that the data need to be robust, as partial or inaccurate data can be harmful.

The idea is to get value from the data for the farmer and to develop key performance indicators. Progress within the various areas of health can then be seen to be improving.

Emphasis is placed on the benefit to the farmer of a team approach that involves other advisers from within and without the veterinary practice. A wholesome term introduced and discussed was that the vet is "the advocate for the cow".

The practical element is clearly of great concern in order to convert tick-box welfare into real improvements in health.



Alan King (left) with Andrew Davies, Simon Robertson, Jon Reader and Andrew Cobner.