

World Buiatrics Congress – part one

THE World Buiatrics Congress was held in Lisbon, with more than 2,400 delegates from 66 countries. Attendees came from new and emerging dairy countries, such as China, Pakistan and Brazil (with 20 million cows) where dairying is growing year on year.

Lisbon is a cosmopolitan city of seven hills, an aqueduct built in the 1750s, a tram system introduced in the early 1900s and a maze of narrow streets, castles and wonderful squares. Like most Mediterranean countries, everything is open late. You can eat at midnight and bars are open into the small hours.

It's a great city to explore on foot, although you need to be fit to tackle the hills. The feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated during our visit and there were some interesting processions, followed by the young people partying very late into the night. The country is highly reliant on tourism, and everyone was very welcoming.

This was an intensive congress, with up to six parallel sessions, so you had to choose what you wanted to hear. A range of papers suited all tastes – from using a dog for heat detection to a serological survey of rift valley fever among sacrifice animals in Mecca during the pilgrimage season.

The congress also introduced two-hour round table meetings with specific themes. Four panellists made short presentations, which then developed into a discussion among the audience. At the end of each of these talks, there was a discussion and votes were taken on statements made by the panellists. Topics included the vet practice as a business, farmer demands and nutrition. Some of these were very interesting, but it would have been better for the speakers to have less time to allow more time for discussion.

Veterinary business management

A new introduction was the round table meetings, and one of these was on the veterinary practice as a business. Four speakers presented their views followed by a round table discussion. Pedro Celeste is a marketing guru and pointed out:

- customer loyalty is a very good indicator of a business and it's essential to build this;
- happy staff who understand the business and its goals are

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looks back on a busy congress covering practice business issues as well as those more directly affecting cattle health and welfare

key to customer satisfaction;

- every business needs to be able to differentiate itself;
- businesses often spend large amounts of time and resources on those who will never be loyal or valuable customers;
- if we lose clients, why? It's very important to understand why it happened – few clients leave because of price, that's the excuse they use for something else;

- we need to make our clients feel valued – after all, we need them, and they don't need us as there are lots of vet practices around; and
- our aim has to be to provide excellent service and add value all the time.

Ellen Schmitt is a practitioner in France whose practice has expanded from three to 12 vets in 10 years. The practice is about to merge with another and increase numbers up to almost 20 vets. The owners of the business decided on a number of items they felt were important, such as quality of life. They wanted to work less, have an interesting job and keep an interesting career path. The expansion has resulted in less out of hours work, almost a nine to five job, and eight weeks holiday for the owners, plus an improved income. They have expanded their range of services and established a large milk quality lab.

At the end of the round table session, the delegates agreed on a number of points including:

- the long-term value of a customer is built on a continuous relationship, rather than on increasing sales;

- increasing clients and services by word of mouth should be a priority;

- a successful vet business will be achieved through people who are passionate about their job;

- the farmer's and vet's perception of what is needed for a farm are not always the same;
- vet practices do not give enough consideration to the value of professional management; and

- vet businesses must grasp the concept of para-professionals or pay the price.



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Lameness

Lameness seems to be a forgotten disease when you compare it with papers published with nutrition and reproduction. However, it is a condition most noticed by consumers in relation to welfare and will become a major issue.

Just think about watching lame cows at the back of a herd walking down the road into the field. Lots of these are not a good advertisement for dairy farming. It's always the higher yielding cows who tend to go lame and you end up with reduced conception rates and lame cows are 60 per cent more likely to leave herd.

Lameness is divided into infectious and non-infectious issues. Non-infectious include sole ulcers and white line disease, which is now considered traumatic as it's not seen in all environments and management schemes. Other lesions, such as hock and hip damage, can be seen as an indicator of problems, and the more trauma, knocks and bangs, then the more lameness.

The thickness of the digital cushion is very important, but remember that digital cushion is a buffer to try to minimise conditions such as ulcers. The size of the digital cushion will be related to body condition score, but there can also be a genetic input. If we are able to measure the thickness of an individual cow's digital cushion then we will help identify problem cows early and could put them in a group with different management.

Contagious and environmental mastitis

Ynte Schukken, from Cornell University, presented a summary of contagious and environmental mastitis, pointing out this is not as black and white as we might think. The team has carried out extensive research, including DNA



The 16th century Belém Tower is a symbol of Portuguese maritime influence around the world.

sequencing, to show if there are common characteristics between bacteria. A difference has been found between the individual pathogens, strains of these pathogens (there are some strains of *Escherichia coli* and *Klebsiella*, which clearly have the ability for cow to cow spread) and the environment. Some are clearly herd-specific while others are related to management.

Contagious bacteria result in high cell counts, their prevalence increases during lactation, they have a long duration of infection and infections are related to previous lactation infections. The converse is true for the environmental bacteria.

Cornell University uses data analysis, an udder health audit and bacteriology to build up a picture of what is happening on a farm. It has an on-farm assessment, where individual farms are assessed according to biosecurity (sourcing replacement animals), milking routine, treatment therapies, the milking machine, environment and overall management. Farmers are scored on each and given a numerical result highlighting the areas that need attention. The focus is on many practical aspects, such as scoring teat cleanliness prior to unit attachment by swabbing teat ends with white towels.

Veterinary education and new graduates

Michael Doherty, from University College Dublin, presented an excellent overview of veterinary education.

To summarise, students are under such pressure in college from different disciplines and species that they find it hard to cope and are in constant fear of failure. This treadmill of educational pressure is starting early in secondary school, where the grind culture, pressure of the production of high grades and the fear of failure is built into

children. This then carries on throughout veterinary education. The concern is that things have to change or the students will fall apart.

However, farmers expect vet schools to produce cattle vets who have excellent clinical skills and the ability to deal with herd health problems. Practices expect to employ competent individuals with excellent communication skills and who have the ability to be fortune tellers in delivering the vision of the practice.

There is clearly a gap between who leaves vet school and who is employed. Most vet practice owners have worked out how to balance their lives around the pressures of running a business – dealing with the on-call demands, demanding clients, continuing education and keeping up with the necessary paperwork – and maybe they forget that more support and help is required at the beginning of a new vet's career. This could have a profound effect on job satisfaction for the individual, his or her ability to fulfil and meet job expectations, and help retain him or her within the profession.

It's interesting how we learn. We were told we retain five per cent by listening, 10 per cent from reading, 20 per cent from audiovisual presentations, 50 per cent from discussion groups, 75 per cent from doing what you were taught and 90 per cent from teaching others.

DEMO mastitis project

Sofie Piepers, from Ghent University, talked about the DEMO project, which is an education project on mastitis for dairy farmers.

This involves a series of roadshows using mastitis experts and a model farmer to help influence groups of farmers. They asked farmers to complete questionnaires and found only 13 per cent of

farmers changed their liners at the correct time, and that a minority understood standard mastitis treatment protocols, making this a global opportunity for vets.

Most farmers agreed a farm-specific approach was beneficial, but despite this, up to one third were unwilling to change their bad habits, especially when it came to culling. It is good communication and education on mastitis and milk quality that seems to change the farmers' attitude and behaviour.

Extramural studies

Extramural studies (EMS) are a vital part of producing good, practical vets. Listening to lectures and using audiovisual training aids result in shallow learning. We need to provide deep learning through problem-solving activities and group challenges that encourage knowledge penetration and communication and problem-solving skills.

The issue of EMS is also challenging and, in the past, students and vet schools have relied on the goodwill of practices and their vets to spend time to educate students. However, practices have become more busy, farmers have less time to spend with vets and students on farms and so the students start to lose out.

The University of Michigan pays practices to deliver three-week rotations of EMS and the practice is paid £75,000 per EMS student, but the practice is expected to deliver a structured EMS project.

In the UK, some practices have a similar arrangement from universities using a much lower level of funding. As always, money for education is highly limited and in vet schools, many demands are made on any available funds and cattle practice makes up a very small proportion of total vet work. ■

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