

Pain relief that won 't hurt your pocket

No pain – and plenty to gain

A new wave of vet training – and thinking – is writing 'pain relief' into many standard treatment protocols. So should you be considering administering more pain relief to your sick cows?

text Rachael Porter

Pain relief in humans – if we need it we take it for granted. But what about pain relief for your cows? It's not at the front of vets or producers minds when treating cows for mastitis or lameness, for example, or after a difficult calving, but Pfizer's Dave Gilbert says that's all changing.

The new vets coming through college are learning about pain relief options for cattle and many practicing vets are starting to add non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as Pfizer's Rimadyl for cattle, to their treatment protocols.

And there are more pain-relieving NSAIDs available now, including generics. "A few years ago there were only a handful on the market and not all were licensed for use on cattle," says Mr Gilbert.

"But today there are many more, they're more readily available and cost effective and they're also easier to use.

"Pfizer's NSAID, for example, provides a complete treatment in one single shot. It can be administered at the same time as treatment, whether it's for a calf with pneumonia or a severe case of mastitis. The job's done – producers don't have to worry about remembering to administer a second dose 12 or 24 hours later.

It's quick and easy and they feel as if they've done everything they can to make the animal comfortable while treatment takes effect."

Subtle signs

So why, when pain relief is readily available, has it taken so long for dairy cows' 'pain' to be addressed?

"It's difficult to define pain. You can ask a person if they're in pain, but you can't ask a cow. And cows are stoical creatures and tend to 'hide' any signs of pain.

But this stoicism counts against them in

the dairy herd. More subtle signs of pain can be a depressed appetite, a reduction in rumination and a dip in milk yield, as well as a reduction in mobility.

Extreme symptoms of pain include drooling, panting, lameness, an outstretched neck and, ultimately, a cow that won't stand.

"Take a close look at your cows, particularly those you're treating for injury and disease, and see if you can spot any signs of pain.

"Even when you know what to look for, it's no easy task," says Mr Gilbert.

So he says it's safe to assume that a cow with mastitis, for example, is in some degree of pain.

"Mastitis is a painful condition – just ask any woman you know that's had it. And cows do respond to treatment with a NSAID."

Mr Gilbert adds that it's important to consider the costs and benefits that you can't see.

"Pain can impact on fertility. Mastitis, or any other disease or painful condition, in early lactation, when the cow is already on a nutritional knife edge, will knock her into a negative energy balance. And this has another knock on effect – on fertility."

Oocyte quality, for example, will be poor due to nutritional stress, and the chances of getting her in calf to first service are reduced.

"Administering a NSAID along with treatment will soon get her back on her feet and eating and this will limit the impact on fertility."

Another reason why pain relief is absent from many treatment protocols is cost – in the past it's simply been too expensive. One shot of a branded NSAID could cost up to £30, but the launch of generic products and new drugs means that

pain relief can cost as little as £1 per injection.

"Producers have always been interested in pain relief, but it's only ever been given to animals showing signs of pain.

Vets haven't, in the past, generally recommended it and so producers don't use it.

"But awareness among producers of the

benefits of NSAIDs and other 'supportive therapies', such as straw-yard housing and a little TLC for newly calved cows and heifers, is growing. Producers are aware that pain is another 'stressor' on the cow and some now expect their vet to administer antibiotics for an infection and a NSAID to deal with any pain and inflammation and get the animal back on

her feet and functioning normally," says Mr Gilbert.

UK vets are indeed lagging behind their European counterparts when it comes to administering pain relief to dairy cows. Nottingham Vet School's Jon Huxley led a team that completed a survey of nine EU countries in 2004, which looked at attitudes to – and the administration of

– pain relief. More than 2,500 vets responded and the data makes interesting reading.

"The UK dairy industry can learn from its European counterparts as far as pain relief is concerned," says Dr Huxley.

"Some Scandinavian countries are more finely honed than we are. We're equal to our neighbouring countries, such as France. But we do lag behind on some aspects."

Speeds recovery

Trial work is on going to demonstrate that not only does using a NSAID offer welfare benefits, but also economic ones. It's obvious that if a cow receives pain relief, the sooner it can resume its normal behaviour – eating, drinking, moving around, ruminating and lactating. This also has implications for cow fertility.

But this has yet to undergo scientific scrutiny. It is not possible to accurately quantify, in financial terms, the benefits of using NSAIDs from a milk production and profitability point of view.

"But we do know that pain does slow recovery rate and that administering a NSAID will 'keep an animal going' until the treatment given to tackle a bad case of mastitis or pneumonia begins to work – that much is obvious," says Dave Gilbert.

"And a cows that's able to stand, eat, drink, ruminate, walk and lactate effectively is less likely to develop other conditions associated with the initial trauma or disease," he adds.

"In the longer term, follicle and oocyte quality and other factors associated with fertility are less likely to be affected. The quicker the animal makes a full recovery the better and anything that can help speed up that process is a good thing."

"These hidden benefits might not be easy to see on a balance sheet, but they are there – just as the hidden costs are there for the cows that were not treated with a NSAID.

"And with the average cost of a shot of NSAID at about £10, it's a case of can producers afford not to administer pain relief," adds Mr Gilbert. |



Cow signals: drooling is just one of many symptoms to look out for that may indicate that a cow is in pain