

'Can do' approach to chronic lameness is needed

Tough love for 'chronic' cows

Most herds have a handful of 'problem' cows with chronic lameness. Two leading dairy vets explain why it's time to tackle serious hoof health problems head on.

text Rachael Porter

Severely lame cows – with a mobility score of 3 – rarely get the correct treatment, if any.

Producers and foot trimmers often give up on them, choosing instead to either milk them on for as long as possible or to cull them.

But vet Ben Brearley, from The Livestock Partnership based in West Sussex, believes that, with the correct treatment and pain relief, these cows can sometimes recover and continue to have a productive lactation and remain in the milking herd. "If producers pick up chronically lame cows and deal with them promptly, by presenting them to a vet, even severe hoof lesions, such as toe necrosis and wall ulcers and deep infections, can be treated successfully," he says.

Starting point

"This means that the cow may be able to complete her lactation and even go on to see another one or two. Or she may avoid becoming a farm casualty and, instead, end up being sent off on the lorry as a valuable cull cow. Either way, it's a win – for the cow and the producer."

He says the first step is to identify the cows with chronic lameness: "Acknowledging that they're there is a starting point. Many producers' 'threshold' for accepting lameness is quite high and they don't always see them. They also need to put them in front of a vet."

"The lesions we see in these cows often require specialist treatment – usually with a local anaesthetic – and that's not something that a foot trimmer can do," he adds.

Using an anaesthetic makes the cow comfortable during treatment and this, in

turn, means that the vet can focus on the job in hand without fear of being kicked or inflicting more pain on the animal. "It improves cow welfare – both during and immediately after treatment. And using a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug will also provide pain relief for the cow after treatment, as well as help to reduce swelling," explains Dorset-based specialist hoof vet Nick Bell, from The Royal Veterinary College.

He too is an advocate of treating cows with chronic lameness: "But it has to be done properly. Too many chronic cows have their feet lifted time and time again, but with little or no effect on their mobility score. "The key is to go in 'hard' and get it right first time."

Dr Bell runs practical classes and uses rejected cows' feet from the abattoir to demonstrate lameness problems and treatments. "I see all kinds of lesions – some worse than others – and quite often I look at a foot and think 'I could have done something with that'."

He says he's been particularly inspired by US-based foot trimmer Karl Burgi. "He's never satisfied and doesn't like to be beaten – even by what some would call 'non-healing' lesions. He's always looking at ways to improve what he does and successfully treat even the worst cases of lameness."

Thorough job

US foot trimmers are allowed to use local anaesthetic and they do treat some severe cases of lameness with considerable success. "I wouldn't like to see UK foot trimmers using local anaesthetic, but I would like to see more producers presenting these 'chronic' cows to their vet."



Nick Bell: "I'm disappointed if I don't see a vast improvement after one treatment"

"Vets can use a local anaesthetic – it works quickly and we can then get on and do a proper job without the cow kicking and struggling. We can do a thorough job and, hopefully, deal with a problem with just one treatment."

He adds that he's genuinely 'disappointed' if he doesn't see a vast improvement in a 'chronic' cow after just one treatment. "A second treatment should certainly do the job. The trick is to assess the cows carefully before starting any treatment and to decide which ones are likely to respond to treatment and which ones won't."

Mr Brearley agrees and says it's vital to be realistic about the prognosis for these cows before treating. And Dr Bell says that producers should also try to be more optimistic.

Change mindset

Some problems are beyond treatment, such as long-standing lesions and infections that have travelled to the bone. "These are usually impossible to treat, but not all score 3 cows should be written off," he says.

"I think that a change of mindset is required. A 'can treat' attitude goes a long way. But there does come a point, if an infection has tracked really deeply into the foot, where you may have to admit defeat. That's said, amputating a claw can also be extremely effective and successful."

Trials, by vet Sara Pederson, have shown that cows without one claw can complete their lactation and go on to have more. "One cow milked for another 980 days after having a claw amputated – that's more than three lactations. And even making a cow comfortable, so she can



Ben Brearley: "It's vital to be realistic about prognosis prior to treatment"

walk onto a lorry as a cull, is a better result than having her shot on farm and incurring a cost."

The latter option costs about £200, but even cull cows in relatively poor condition can realise around £300. Cows in top condition can sell for up to £800.

"So investing around £50 to treat a severe lesion can be money well spent, even if she still ends up going off as a cull," says Mr Brearley. He adds that he charges £15 for vet time, plus the cost of materials, for treating one claw. "We've reduced our fees for treating lameness – we just want the chance to see and treat these animals."

"Treating these cows just requires a bit of effort – and a small investment in vet time, blocks, bandages, pain relief and sometimes antibiotics," agrees Dr Bell.

He adds that early intervention will also increase the likelihood of success when treating 'chronic' cows. And it can also prevent cows reaching 'score 3' in the first place. Picking up cows scoring 1 and 2 is the ideal, of course, but there will always be the odd cow that slips through the net.

"But take a 'zero tolerance' approach and don't ignore her – get her looked at by the vet. Treat her once, treat her properly and focus on preventing any more new chronic cases."

The cure rate for 'chronic' score 3 and above cases is about 6%, compared to 80% for scores 1 and 2.

"So the focus has to remain firmly on prevention, obviously, and keeping chronic cases to a minimum," says Dr Bell. "And remember, too much time spent on 'chronic' cows could see other score 1 and 2 cows not being seen by the foot trimmer and then they too could slip through the net and become 'chronic'." |



Thorough job: vets can use a local anaesthetic to make the cow more comfortable when treating severe hoof problems