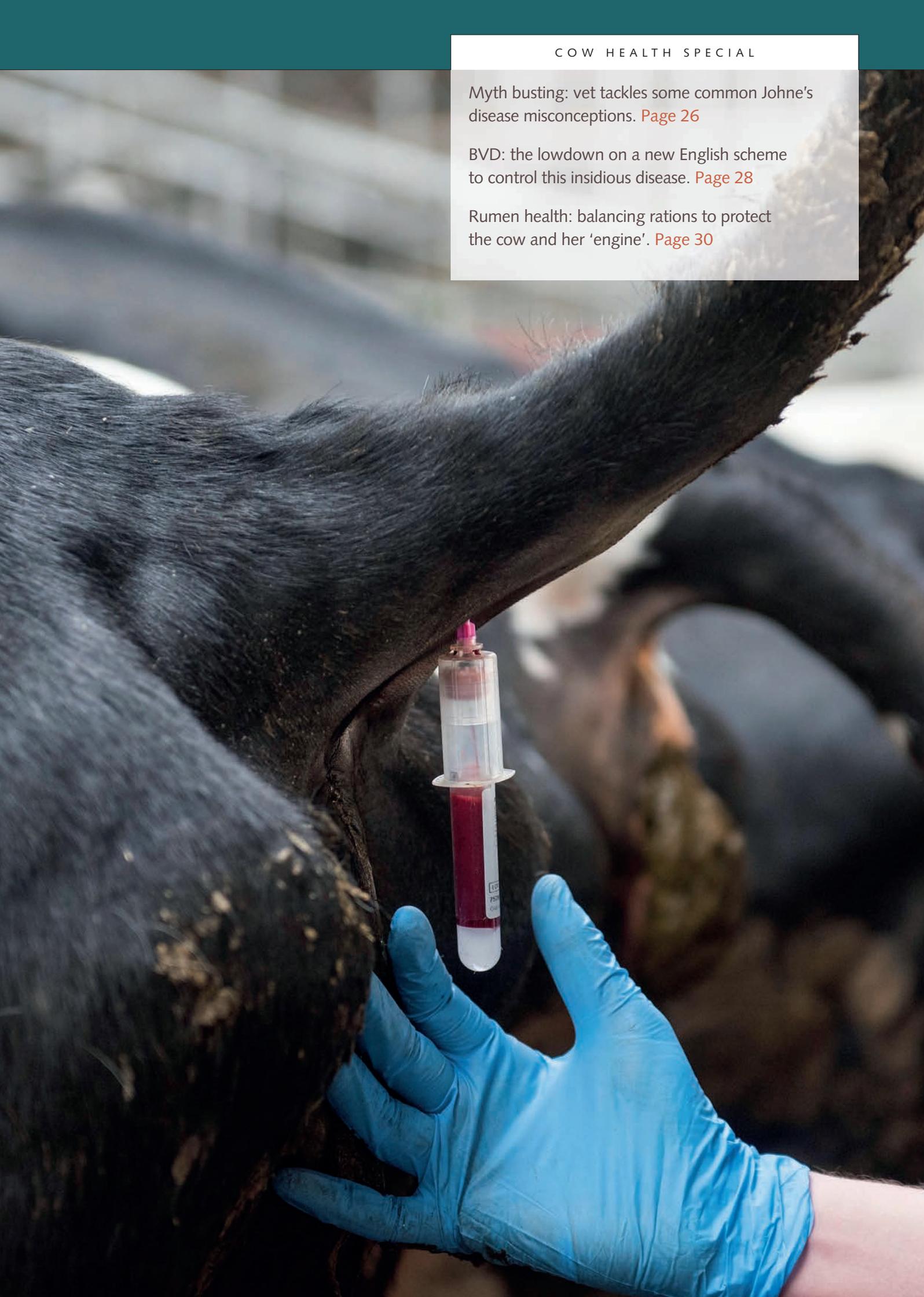


Myth busting: vet tackles some common Johne's disease misconceptions. [Page 26](#)

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Myth busting is vital to drive home Johne's control message

No more excuses

Many producers could still be doing more to control Johne's disease in their herds. So what's stopping them? We spoke to a vet, from a leading UK dairy practice, to find out.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's an insidious disease and difficult to control. But there are steps that producers should take to check if Johne's is a problem in their herd – even if they've never seen a full-

blown case. And, if it's there, following a well-designed plan with strict protocols, means that steady progress can be made towards eliminating this costly disease. Yet still producers find what one

Shropshire-based vet calls 'blockers' to avoid tackling the disease. "A key reason why producers resist putting a control plan in place is because they've never seen a full blown Johne's cow wasting away – they genuinely believe that their herds are free of the disease," says Whitchurch-based LLM Farm Vets' Mark Dickinson.

"But, the truth is, to see a clinical cow is relatively uncommon. Many leave the herd, as involuntary culls, for other reasons before they reach that stage of the disease. It's not uncommon to have a



herd with a high proportion of Johne's affected cows without recognising a clinically affected cow."

Too difficult

"Many producers, who have herds with Johne's, have never seen such a cow. But they've certainly felt the consequences of the disease – both in terms of cow health and production."

"Other producers shy away from tackling Johne's because they believe it's just too difficult and complicated to 'sort it out' and there is a degree of sticking their heads in the sand", Mr Hickinson says.

He knows from experience this is simply not the case. Control requires effort, organisation, and long-term commitment. But, with help from their vet, implementation of a control programme can be relatively straight



Separate area: calving 'red' and 'amber' cows away from the rest of the herd is vital to prevent the spread of Johne's disease

forward. Consistency is the key and, with regular monitoring and follow-ups, improvements in disease prevalence within the herd should be seen."

Having helped producers to draw up Johne's disease control plans – and implementing them – there's not much that Dr Hickinson hasn't seen or heard on units, particularly when it comes to myths and misconceptions about the disease.

"TB is a key 'blocker'. Some producers believe that they are unable to test for Johne's because they are closed down with TB. But this is false and it's not a valid excuse. There is a window of opportunity to screen for Johne's between TB testing, even in herds that are being tested in at 60-day intervals. By delaying the Johne's screen to at least six weeks after the most recent TB test, the chance of false positive results can be reduced significantly.

"And tackling Johne's can only help to improve herd immunity. We know that infectious disease, including TB, can flare up, just like Johne's, during times of stress. So, if anything, herds that are closed down with TB should be looking to set aside a window to identify – and take steps to tackle – a potential Johne's problem."

Confusion can also arise when it comes to testing. Many producers, in Dr Hickinson's experience, often question individual milk test results and want to follow them up with either blood or faecal PCR checks. "But the point to reiterate here is that the milk test is as good as the blood test. If a cow looks well – particularly if she's a favourite or a top producer – and her result is positive then producers can sometimes be in denial about that," he says.

He adds that this is sometimes fuelled by a cow testing amber on one test and then testing green in a subsequent check. "So it's vital that producers understand how the disease behaves. It can lie dormant for several years before flaring up – usually triggered by stress or a challenge to the cow's immune system. And that's why routine monitoring through milk testing is important. The results can wax and wane over time.

"A change from amber to green doesn't mean that the cow is now disease free – she's just able to cope with the disease challenge at that point in time. And she could, and most likely will, test amber or even red at a subsequent check. There's nothing wrong with the test. It's the nature of this disease that can result in



Mark Hickinson: "When it comes to tackling Johne's disease, there really are no valid excuses"

apparent variation in results over time." Understanding the way the disease behaves and spreads will also help to 'answer' or bust two other all-too-commonly repeated myths about the disease. "I have a producer who says that they have a few cows that are flagged as 'red' through the milk test, but it's not a problem in their herd. And this is wrong."

Red-cow risk

"Depending on the size of the herd, that might be 10 cows in a herd of 200 cows – that's 5% – or 10 cows in a 100-cow herd, which is 10%. Either way, these cows are a risk to rest of the herd and you must recognise the scale of the problem. Even one red cow means that there needs to be a control plan in place. So be honest and ask yourself, and your vet, how bad it really is. Johne's is a classic 'iceberg' disease. You only see a fraction of what's really going on.

"And the same can be said for the classic comment about red cows that 'look fine'. That may well be, but if she looks well and she's flagged as red in the test then she is, undoubtedly, what has been termed a 'super shedder'. She's a disaster on four legs for the herd as these cows are, in theory, the most 'dangerous' cows on the unit – certainly as far as her contribution to the population of Johne's bacteria is concerned."

And the final 'blocker' on Dr Hickinson's top-five list is the excuse that there's no space to calve 'amber' and 'red' cows away from the rest of the herd. "I just don't buy that. There's always a way to separate these infectious animals around calving – even on the smallest units. And it's the only way to protect the rest of the herd from the disease. If producers are stuck for ideas then their vet can always help them to come up with a solution." |