Mapping the **medicine-reduction route**

Reduce, refine, replace – that's what it comes down to in the drive to reduce antibiotic use on dairy units. To meet targets, producers need to know where they're starting from and the best route to pursue.

TEXT KAREN WRIGHT

You can't take antibiotics out without putting something else in place, is the message from Dorset-based vet Jenny Bellini, from Friars Moor Vets. "And, most importantly, we need to know where we're starting from on each farm, and the best way to make improvements and reduce the reliance on antibiotics.

"It's a two-way process – you can't just cut medicine use," says Jenny, who adds that the process of reducing antibiotic use in a controlled and effective way is being significantly improved now that three quarters of the practice's 110 dairy clients are signed up to FarmAssist.

Developed by National Milk Laboratories (NML), FarmAssist is an antibiotic monitoring and analysis scheme that records medicine purchases, as supplied directly from the vet, with NML testing data. Vets have access to quarterly FarmAssist reports for their participating producers, detailing the rolling 12-month antibiotic use and the use by purpose, such as dry cow tubes, lactating cow tubes and medicines for young stock.

Jenny Bellini:
"Reducing antibiotics is a two-way process"

Medicine picture

Friars Moor was one of the first practices to use the scheme and currently has the largest number of users among practices in the UK.

"We signed up the first clients early in 2019 and back dated their records for 12 months so we have nearly 18 months of data for these herds," adds Jenny.

"Once you have a picture of medicine use on the unit for a 12-month period, you can see what medicines are being used and when, and where the best areas might be to tackle first in reducing their use and implementing better control strategies."

Realising the real benefit of FarmAssist, Friars Moor had a drive to get more of its dairy clients to sign up in spring 2019, and now 75% are taking advantage of the scheme.

"It's a useful and important tool in the practice's drive to reduce antibiotic use. We're hoping to have all our dairy units signed up by the end of the year," she says.

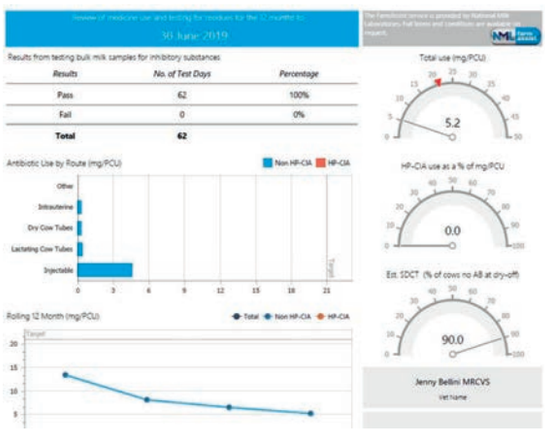
This is a target that Jenny hopes is realistic, bearing in mind that there's no input, extra work or cost for the producer – the cost is supported by participating milk buyers.

NML **FarmAssist**

- Provides industry standardised antibiotic reporting
- Supports farm assurance scheme requirements including Red Tractor
- Supports vet-led review of antibiotic use on farm
- Supports responsible medicine use on farm
- Drives change

"Producers agree to be signed up and allow their medicine use to be monitored on a standardised system; it's an approach encouraged by many milk buyers."
Aside of the ease of use of the scheme, the data is allowing vets to be more targeted in their advice on farm when it comes to reducing medicine use.
Being able to see the breakdown of antibiotic types used for cows, and those used for treating young stock in a 12-month period can spring some surprises: "For us, and for producers," says Jenny.
"But what it really provides is a valuable starting point and shows up usage of medicines in key areas. Producers find it easier to visualise and when we go on farm we've got valuable discussion points as to how we can reduce usage in certain areas and make changes."
And these on-farm reviews are even more valuable where the unit's performance can be gauged against benchmarks. "We get a practice FarmAssist report for all our participating farms, so we can see the range being used and the mid points for the medicine groups across the board.
"The benchmarks help us put medicine use on each unit into context, and we can see which areas to focus on and where progress might be made by adopting preventative medicine, improving protocols and overall, saving money."
Jenny is finding that the scheme's reports are opening the door to more focussed discussions on farm.
"Producers can see the on-going medicine use and start taking more interest. Without a transparent report they may not perceive a problem and losses can be hard to visualise," she adds.

Example FarmAssist herd report



Detailed investigation

Antibiotics are commonly used on dairy units for transition and fresh cows, young stock, mastitis and dry cow treatments. "We can look at each area, and for example, if we see a lot of antibiotics being used in young stock treatment for pneumonia, a discussion on ventilation and calf housing might lead to a few improvements."
Among Friars Moor's Arla producers, they have seen the use of antibiotics to treat calf pneumonia fall by 78% in 16 months, since the scheme was introduced.
"Surprisingly high mastitis treatments will also warrant investigation, to make sure the producer is following the prescribed dosage and not over-treating a cow."
Another focus is dry cow therapy. Friars Moor has seen a reduction of 11% of cows across its practice receiving dry cow therapy tubes since 2016. "I would anticipate this rate of progress speeding up now most of our producers are using FarmAssist," adds Jenny. "It's certainly helped so far, and it's a key area where real gains can be made in meeting the industry's reduced antibiotic use targets."
Overall, the practice has found that producers who signed up for the scheme and have adopted agreed preventative protocols have seen their antibiotic use reduce without any dip in cow health or performance.
"And it's also generating more interest from producers in overall medicine use on farm. We're seeing a greater uptake in our MilkSure courses that promote responsible medicine use."
Jenny – and particularly the vet's farm office staff – also appreciate the use of a single medicine monitoring scheme across their dairy clients. "Instead of having to meet the requirements of four or five different schemes used by milk buyers, it is far timelier and more cost-effective to use one. There's less risk of errors and the standardised data is of much greater value on farm." |