Do thin cows become lame, or lame cows become thin?

Lameness remains a major health and welfare issue for the UK dairy industry; a recent study estimated that 36.8% of cows in the UK herd are lame at any one time (range 0-79.2%). Due to the high levels of lameness nationally, it has wrongly become an accepted presence on farm. Over the last two years, we have had many farms participate in lameness investigations using a Dairy Co template and have found that with increasing understanding and awareness of the causes and control strategies of the main lesions, we can have rapid and marked reductions in lameness. Targets of <10% lameness are very achievable with the correct attention to detail and are key to optimising your herds profitability.

Research into the causes and control of lameness in herds has been invested in heavily. After recently attending the Cattle Lameness Conference, I was lucky enough to hear from some of the leading veterinary professionals, about the latest developments in their studies to answer the question that titles this article.

We are all aware that lame cows become thin and research shows that the digital cushion, or ‘fat pad’ in the foot has a potentially important role to play in lesion development. It has been shown to reduce in size when animals lose weight and it is thought to act as a shock absorber in the foot during each step. The fat pad in heifers is poorly developed and only becomes fully formed in second and third ‘calvers’. From this we can deduce that body condition score (BCS) is likely to have an important role in lameness prevention.

The most recent research has been taking place over the last 8 years, and has included weekly mobility and body condition scoring of many animals! Analysis is still on going, however, it can be said that if animals lose body condition in the first 4 weeks post calving they were at greater risk of lameness. Therefore, it appears that thin cows become lame!

Absolute recommendations have not been finalised yet, however, it is likely to be very similar to current recommendations. These are to calve animals down at BCS 2.5-3, and to lose no more than 0.5 BCS by time of peak yield. These recommendations are advised for management of all conditions around calving, including ketosis and retained placentas. Where lameness management is concerned, it is likely that the advice will be to minimise this weight loss to within 0.25 BCS.

It is obvious from the initial findings that body condition scoring your herd regularly, but particularly either side of, calving, is going to be very important in herd lameness control. As with many of the common conditions we face when calving high yielding animals, minimising the post calving weight loss is paramount to a successful transition.

Lameness control is a broad and complex strategy that involves the entire farm team. Dairy Co have compiled a thorough approach to lameness control, with an emphasis on keeping healthy feet healthy. For more information on the benefits of a Dairy Co Healthy Feet Plan, or some dedicated time to lameness prevention on your farm, please speak to Jonny Duncan, or your regular vet.

Don’t forget we also have Steve Austin, our excellent foot trimmer, available to help you tackle your lameness issues. Steve is available for trimming and mobility scoring as required.
Another Baby!

Congratulations to Darrell and his wife Hannah on the birth of their third child Theo who weighed in at 8lb 7oz on 29th April.

Cheshire Show

Come and join us on the Willows stand at Cheshire show. You can have a seat, a nice cup of tea and a cake! We look forward to another good show and wish all of you who are competing the very best of luck.

Embryo Transfer Services

We continue to offer the full range of ET services under the revised name of Willows Embryo Transfer Services. Owen Tunney remains as team leader and does a significant amount of hands on flushing. Mark Boland is our full time ET technician who has a wealth of practical experience in ET. In addition we have 5 further vets who are trained to transfer embryos and do so on a regular basis.

ET is not just for the elite genetic stock keeper it also is useful in commercial herds as a means of getting problem cows pregnant using an additional implanted embryo. If you have a repeat breeder that you want to get in-calf and you are running out of options to try then why not give her a go with an embryo transfer. Speak to one of the vets for more information about what’s involved.

New vet joins the team

We are delighted to welcome a new vet, Phillip Jones, to the farm team. Many of you will know him already as he spent a good bit of time with us as a student before qualifying from Bristol Vet School in 2011. You may also recognise him as the eldest son of Simon Jones one of our more senior farm partners. After spending 3 years working in farm animal practice in Wiltshire Phillip has spent the last 9 months working in dairy practice in New Zealand before returning to the UK. Please make him feel welcome as he settles into his new role.