Time to take stock

The start of a new year is an obvious time to reflect on the previous 12 months and make plans for the year ahead. Charter vets joined the Willows Group in November 2015 and bring a mix of youth and experience in their farm team based in east Cheshire. We are delighted that they are now part of the farm team and look forward to integrating with them further. This merger, like those that have gone before, reflects the significant consolidation which is happening in the veterinary profession. Consolidation is also seen in many of the other industries which support livestock producers with local examples in feed companies and auctioneers.

The result of consolidation is a stronger business which in our case means we are well placed to meet the needs of our clients in the future. We are able to maintain a strong clinical team of vets who are among the very best in their field and able to deliver a very high level of healthcare to your stock. Within the clinical team we have a range of vets who hold or are studying towards higher level qualifications which ultimately benefit your livestock. As members of XLvets we have access to all sorts of industry specific knowledge and training from around the UK and beyond. We bring you the latest ideas and products in the world of animal health and help you understand how they fit into your farming system. We continue to encourage close working relationships between individual vets and farmers so you regularly get the same vet who knows your farm and the local area.

For many of our clients 2015 has been particularly difficult due to the falling price of milk to levels well below the cost of production. This sort of downturn helps focus the mind on what is important/essential and what is an add-on. In addition to dealing with sick animals, calvings and TB tests day to day our role as your vet is to identify the key drivers of herd/flock health and productivity and help you make progress in these areas. Regardless of whether you keep beef sheep or dairy there are some key principles which apply,

- Control infectious diseases.
- Use veterinary medicines responsibly.
- Meet processor/retailer requirements for your product to maximise income. Obviously the application of these principles will be different on cattle farms to sheep farms and within sectors there will be variation in how the objectives are delivered.

One common theme that these principles share is the requirement for data recording. Accurate data means you can measure current performance, benchmark against other farms and measure progress down the line. This is not a call for more paperwork as most if not all this information is recorded in one form or another already but it does highlight the need for consistent accuracy in recording. Setting a simple but achievable target can also be helpful for example,

- How many cows do I need to get pregnant this year? How many lambs do I need to wean?
- What mobility score do I want to achieve? Can I afford not to have a foot trimmer if my Tesco contract is in jeopardy?
- Can I get BVD free in 2016? Do I want another abortion storm in my ewes?
- Do I have resistance to wormers in my flock? What would be the benefit from using more pain relief in my cows?
- What is my target carcass weight/ SCC/bactoscan/butterfat?

Asking and answering a few of these questions with your vet will help you identify how to best work together in 2016 and remain focused on the important issues which impact the bottom line. The last couple of years have seen some innovative medicines come to the veterinary market which are having a big impact on many units. Products like Kexxtone and Bovela show how recent advances in pharmaceuticals can improve things on farm. No doubt there are more innovative medicines in development which will again challenge our approach to health and welfare.

The Willows Vet Group farm team are well equipped to deal with the challenges and opportunities which will inevitably come along in 2016 and we look forward to facing it with you.

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- Maximise reproductive performance.
- Minimise lameness.

- Control infectious diseases.
- Use veterinary medicines responsibly.
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Introducing . . .
Jay Tunstall

Having graduated from Liverpool University in 2009 with a degree in Bioveterinary Science, I then went straight to the Royal Veterinary College to get my degree in Veterinary Medicine. Since qualifying I’ve worked in a farm only practice in Somerset, and my main interests are lameness and fertility. I’m a qualified DairyCo (now AHDB) Mobility Mentor, and enjoy helping farms reduce lameness and therefore improve profitability and welfare of their herd.

Having grown up in Liverpool, I am a keen Liverpool fan, but have retired from playing due to a lack of ability. I also enjoy kayaking, and will be looking for a local kayak club to join to get back out on the water. I look forward to getting out and meeting those that I haven’t yet met in the near future.

XL Vets have recently launched a campaign called Calf Tracker. The campaign will provide a platform to help us engage with you around your calf health and rearing with the main aim of optimising calf health and performance up to weaning.

To get a handle on calf health and performance Calf Tracker requires the recording of some basic information. A start weight or birth weight and a weight at weaning are needed to work out a growth rate and this can be compared to a target growth weight, around 0.8kg daily live weight gain. Recording pneumonia and scour cases and number of deaths on a month by month basis will give an idea of any problem areas for calf health. Also to assess how good colostrum transfer has been we can blood sample calves less than 8 days old and measure the level of protein in the blood, too low and the calf is unlikely to have taken on enough colostrum.

This period from birth to weaning is very important to set calves up to fulfil their potential as a cow. A calf fed to optimal levels will grow quicker, be more resistant to disease and increase its productive potential as a cow. Current research suggests an optimal calving age for heifers of 22-24 months for maximising yields and longevity so getting your calves off to a flying start in this period, reaching target growth rates with no disease, will have real benefits.

What we are suggesting as a starting point to optimise calf rearing would be an initial visit from us, to set you up on the Calf Tracker campaign. We would weigh-band all calves up to weaning, find out about your current calf rearing, set you up with some recording sheets for disease cases and blood sample calves less than 8 days old. This will enable us to assess current calf health and performance. A second visit 2 -3 months later, carrying out repeat measurement and looking at records of disease cases will let us see if there are any areas that could be improved and we can help with recommendations.

If you are interested or have and questions please contact the Willows calf champion, Laurence on 07961 820115.