

## Animal health

# Work with your vet to boost herd health

Vets and farmers working together can really make a difference around animal health and reducing antibiotic usage, writes **Tommy Heffernan**

**I**rish farmers face the challenge of reducing on-farm antibiotic usage over the next number of years. Farmers have an important role and responsibility to reduce the risk of antibiotic resistance developing. Antibiotic resistance is a risk to the animals on your farm but we also know that people are staying longer in hospital and that doctors are struggling to find effective antibiotics against bacteria. It is a real challenge for human health but also affects our animals and our shared environment, so it is a One Health issue.

There is new legislation coming in January 2022 which aims to address the over-use or unnecessary usage of antibiotics. Protecting human health and our environment are key drivers behind the new legislation. The message is that prevention is better than cure and so working to optimise animal health makes sense for everyone. The first and most important step is to start working with your own vet.

In Ireland, vets prescribe antibiotics to farming clients but also do much more around animal health management. While antibiotics will always be a fundamental part of treating sick animals, we must look at ways to reduce our usage.

One simple tip is to review your usage



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
Bia agus Mara  
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**A joint awareness campaign by the Irish Farmers Journal and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

for the last three years. Look at the areas in which most treatments occur. Then focus on ways of tackling these issues.

Every farmer should review how well treatments are working with their vet.

You will always get better results if you consult your vet and work together to prevent disease. Disease prevention means better profitability as you are not spending money on expensive medication but more importantly the animals



**Vet Ger Cusack discusses selective dry cow therapy with dairy farmer Brian Cleary on his farm at Ballinarid, Bunmahon, Co Waterford.** \ Donal O'Leary

thrive better. An animal that has had a bout of pneumonia takes longer to finish as there will always be some residual lung damage which affects growth.

You should always make sure sick animals are seen to quickly to allow more successful treatment outcomes and also always complete the antibiotic courses correctly by following your prescription.

Working with your vet to identify areas in which you can reduce usage really makes a difference. This can be done by reviewing usage and see if patterns are developing. For instance, if you're using a lot of medicines to treat lame sheep, then a flock lameness plan makes sense.

Dairy farms can improve hygiene and metabolic disease around calving to really affect diseases such as mastitis and metritis. Also, more fluid treatment and the use of anti-inflammatory medications can help ensure a quicker recovery.

Take some samples (diagnostics) to

make better on-farm decisions. Calf scour sampling can determine what bugs might be causing the problem. Most calf scours will need supportive treatments, and often will not require antibiotics. So you are wasting your money as well as possibly destroying the good gut bacteria that the calf needs for optimal growth.

Your vet can work with you to make better vaccination choices that reduce the need for treatments and reduce sickness. Vaccination can be costly but the costs of treating disease and failure to thrive are far greater. Treatment plans can be drawn up and reviewed regularly. Most importantly, your vet can be that critical set of eyes that reviews disease risks on your farm at quiet times of year such as before lambing and calving.

Working with your vet, you can make smart decisions about improving animal health, reducing antibiotic usage and being more profitable.

## Space - the final frontier

Getting winter housing right can make all the difference in cattle and sheep, writes **Tommy Heffernan**

We must provide shelter for most animals in the winter and getting this shelter right can make all the difference.

Housing complicates disease issues for a number of reasons:

➤ The animals are changing diet, which often takes two weeks to adjust to. This can be a stressor on them.

➤ At grazing, stock will have freely available food. Indoors, we are trying to replicate this and it is essential to have adequate feed space.

➤ Their environment changes and normal behaviours such as lying down and ruminating for 12-14 hours may change if conditions don't allow.

➤ Fresh air can be difficult to balance indoors, especially for younger animals. We must maximise this while trying to avoid draughts.

➤ Irish winters can be damp and cold. This can be more complicated by the fact that low dry matter silage can mean wetter faeces. This can create the conditions where the bugs that cause disease can prosper.

➤ Normal behaviour changes when you bring animals close together and this can lead to stress in larger groups.

➤ Having animals closer together means disease spreads more easily.

This doesn't mean that we can't see good re-

sults from housing animals and generally we can get animals out to pasture in early spring.

We need to look at ways of tackling these challenges in our housing systems.

We must provide space for animals. Stocking densities beyond what is recommended can be a false economy. Priority animals are ewes and cows in the weeks before and after birthing. They need space to lie down. Every farm must also set a target of having one cubicle per cow.

With disease issues such as pneumonia in winter, key areas to look at are airflow, drainage and stocking densities. Feed space per animal is another key factor. Running scrapers regularly helps also. When dung is very loose in winter, ask why. Adding some straw to the diet could be enough to firm it up.

### Nutrition

All diets must be made up in accordance with stock's nutritional requirements and performance targets. We must not underestimate the role of social groups and heavy stocking densities, particularly with heifers calving in. Bullying can be a big factor here, dramatically increasing stress.

Providing space and a dry lie for animals reduces stress and helps keep animals healthier and more productive. Proper drainage plays a huge role in this also, as it greatly reduces moisture build-up.

If I had one thing I would change on Irish farms it is how we view space in winter housing.

Ample space for normal biology should not be underestimated from an animal health point of view.

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