

Recovery hampered in cows with consecutive high cell counts

A new report shows that cows with consecutive high somatic cell count readings have a markedly lower chance of recovery than those with an initial high cell count.

In this fourth annual report, co-authored by University of Reading's James Hanks, the performance of 500 NMR recording herds is compared for 32 parameters. For each parameter the level achieved by the best performing 25% of herds is quoted as a realistic target level for producers to aim for.

"Performance is generally improving in all herds. The good are getting better but the weaker herds are also improving," says Dr Hanks. "This is especially evident in somatic cell counts (SCC) where results have improved in each of the four years

from 2010 to 2013.

"The average in Holstein Friesian herds has improved from SCC 210,000/ml to 195,000/ml and the best 25% have set a new target of 155,000/ml—a marked improvement from 169,000/ml four years ago. Most significantly, only one in four herds in the UK now record an annual herd cell count worse than 238,000 cells/ml, which is a large improvement on the 268,000 cells/ml recorded in 2010."

Reporting two new parameters this year, Dr Hanks highlights cell count recovery rates. The first shows the percent of cows

with an initial high SCC above 200,000 cells/ml that return to a low SCC, below 200,000 cells/ml, at the following recording. The second parameter shows the markedly lower return to low SCC for cows that already have two or more consecutive high SCCs.

"We found that on half the farms, 52% of the newly infected cows—those with a single high SCC—returned to

low SCC milk at their next recording. We know from previous studies that most of these would have a SCC reading of between 200,000 and 500,000 cells/ml which may well increase their ability to



James Hanks.



Kate Brodie from Wiltshire-based Drove Vets.

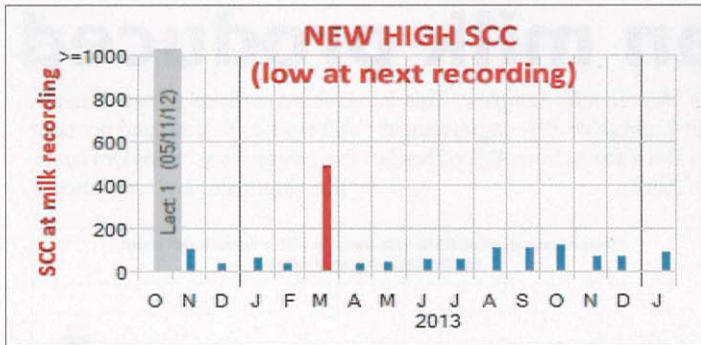
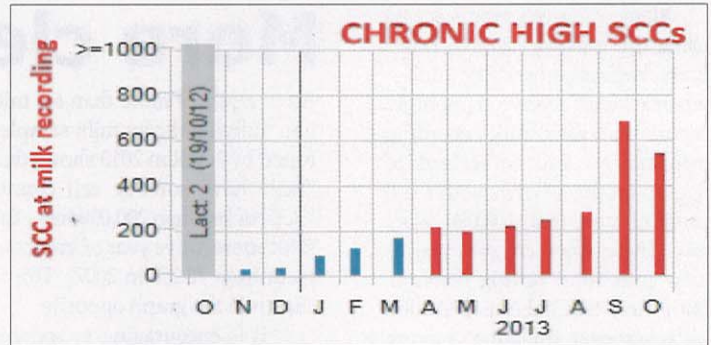


Chart shows a new infection cow illustrating that she 'self-cures' and returns to below 200,000 at next milk recording.



Chronic chart shows a cow with successive high SCC—and these get progressively worse.

'self-cure'."

Conversely, the equivalent recovery rate among cows that have already recorded two or more high SCC dropped to just 17%. On a quarter of the farms this was less than 14%—so relatively few chronic high SCC cows returned to a SCC of 200,000 cells/ml or less at their next recording.

"The decline in recovery rates, from 52% to 17%, includes the effect of any antibiotic treatment that chronic cows may have received. It confirms a study we carried out five years ago that showed the dramatic difference in recovery rates between cows with an initial infection and those with an established chronic infection," adds Dr Hanks.

Management lesson

"The management lesson here is clear. Cows showing an initial high SCC have a good chance of sorting themselves out but chronic high SCC cows do not. They need assistance and clearly the sooner we help the greater the chance of success. We need to target newly qualified chronics—those cows recording their second high SCC. This is very straightforward using milk recording data."

Dr Hanks is keen to see producers focus more on the duration of an infection and less on the magnitude of individual cell counts. "Just treating a few of the highest cell count cows each month could really put the newly qualified chronics at high risk of being missed and their chances of recovery reduced. This study shows that unless you deal with these cows early then their chances of recovery drop markedly."

Wiltshire-based vet Kate Brodie from Drove Vets reinforces this view. "Far too often the vet is brought in to give advice on

treating chronically infected high cell count cows. These cows have often had several, consecutive high somatic cell counts in excess of 1,000,000cells/ml. In reality they are 'broken' beyond repair. The

only sensible suggestions at this stage are to dry off the quarter or dry the cow off early—or to cull her.

"It is far better—for the cow and for production costs—to seek

veterinary help at the early signs that all is not well and this is something we have been helping our dairy clients with."

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