

Is UK livestock in good health?

That was the question asked at a recent winter meeting organised by the British Veterinary Cattle Association and the NFU. **Sarah Trickett** reports

How healthy are we now?

*The UK cattle industry is taking full responsibility to improve cattle health and welfare. Priorities being set by organisations such as the Cattle Health and Welfare Group (CHAWG) and in the future, the newly formed Animal Health and Welfare Board will help drive the direction of the industry.

And the cattle industry has already made steps in improving health, said CHAWG chairman Tim Brigstocke. The uptake of farm health planning, which Mr Brigstocke stated was “the bedrock of everything” saw nearly two thirds of farmers put a plan in place last year.

Of that, 65% of farm health plans were completed with the help of vets or an advisor and 41% of those were using their plans on a regular basis to inform disease management decisions. “This is really positive stuff,” he said.

There has also been a huge upsurge in cattle health schemes. Once thought as very “Scottish and beef centric” Mr Brigstocke said there was a “pleasing growth” in health schemes across the UK.



The uptake in health planning and disease eradication schemes shows farmers are working to improve animal health.

“It is now thought about 14,000 cattle farmers are involved in some form of monitoring, control and eradication health scheme. It’s encouraging as this equates to about 14% of cattle farmers whereas in 2007 it was only about 4%.

“This shows farmers are taking control of their own destiny and the industry is running itself.”

Although he admitted some of the schemes, such as BVD eradication were very piecemeal, he was pleased there was activity going on.

Breed societies also have a role to play, he said. “The Welsh Black Society is a great example.

“They have employed a vet advisor for their Johnes’s disease control scheme and last year 89% of members were accredited free of Johnes’s compared to just 23% in 2002.”

But surveillance and monitoring is key to keep on top of disease. “Reports show that 240,000 cattle die each year for unknown causes and we need to get a handle on why these animals are dying. We also need to be mindful of the health of animals coming in to the UK,” he stressed.

The future of medicine use

*Medicine use in the UK is under threat as pressure to cut antimicrobial use gets ever greater following a resolution by the EU Parliament last year.

Although no specific plan has been put in place to reduce antimicrobial use in the UK, it is an issue the industry must take seriously,

according to NFU graduate trainee Amy Gray.

She warned farmers and vets not to underestimate the power of perception and urged the industry to make structured, informed and responsible decisions when it came to antibiotic use.

Ms Gray explained how there was “growing hysteria” that resistant animal bacteria could pass on to human pathogens. “There is very little scientific evidence to support this and there is much more evidence to support resistance in human bacteria coming from the misuse of antibiotics in humans.”

“It is vital however, vets and farmers continue choosing the right drug for the right bug and that label details for administration are followed for dose, regime and

duration. If we can also implement strategies to reduce disease and the need to use drugs, then that is a step forward," she said.

However, some countries have taken extreme measures to the announcement by the EU last year to cut antibiotic use.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands has adopted some of the strictest policies to cut antibiotic use. The Dutch government has pledged a reduction of 50% by 2013. They also plan to name and shame farmers who exceed a specific level of antibiotic use.

Denmark

Denmark has also adopted strict procedures and has separated vets from the sales of veterinary medicines. Their monitoring system scrutinises the quantities of antibiotics used on farm and a yellow card system is in place for those who exceed levels. Those exceeding levels also face more inspections. Farmers can also only keep a certain amount of antibiotics on farm for five days.

France

The French government has released an action plan to reduce antibiotic usage by 25% over the next five years. It also contains measures to avoid certain antibiotics.

Germany

Germany's quality assurance has pledged its members will cut antibiotic usage by 30% over five years.

UK

The British Poultry Council has stated its members will reduce the overall usage of antibiotics; banning cephalosporins from 1 January 2012, and ban prophylactic fluoroquinolone use in day old chicks.

Worst case for the UK could be:

- * The legal reduction in amount of antibiotics used on farm
- * Banning of certain classes of antibiotics
- * Banning prophylactic use (preventative)
- * Banning vets from selling antibiotics they prescribe
- * Banning the advertising of antibiotics to farmers

However, Ms Gray said there was little proof that reducing antibiotics



ANTHEAKITCHING

Antimicrobial use is an issue the industry must take seriously to secure future use.

would reduce resistance. "In fact, it is more likely that an enforced reduction will not work," she said. For example, banning prophylactic use could actually lead to more animals becoming diseased and requiring prolonged treatment.

Responsible Use of Medicine in Agriculture Alliance's (RUMA) John Fitzgerald said the UK needed to find the right balance so medicines could continue being used on farm. He also warned that if responsible use was not shown, then more controls could be imposed.

"Producers also shouldn't be using medicines as a substitute to good farm management," he said. "We need to take steps to protect the availability of antimicrobials for animals and demonstrate responsible development of medicines, authorisation and use."

"We do know the regulation will change, but we are just not sure just how it will change."

It is expected the industry will see

sales of vet medicines but with the range from 10% up to 85%.

Mr Statham also explained how the profession needed to change in order to retain talent. "Graduates do expect career fulfilment but there is a real challenge retaining them. With today's graduates leaving university with an average debt of £100,000, there are also problems with graduates being able to invest in to practice partnerships. These are harsh realities affecting the profession," said Mr Statham.

"In order to encourage and retain a good supply of vets we need to be offering career progression. There is a need for innovations, optimism and energy."

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GOVERNMENT VETERINARY SERVICES

* And there is also a changing face with government veterinary services, explained DEFRA's chief veterinary officer Nigel Gibbens. He admitted that the surveillance budget had been running over for some time and costs had to be saved.

And one of the areas that will change is the way the industry uses the regional network of vet labs. Mr Gibbens explained how the labs, which offer postmortem services, were failing to offer good geographical species coverage.

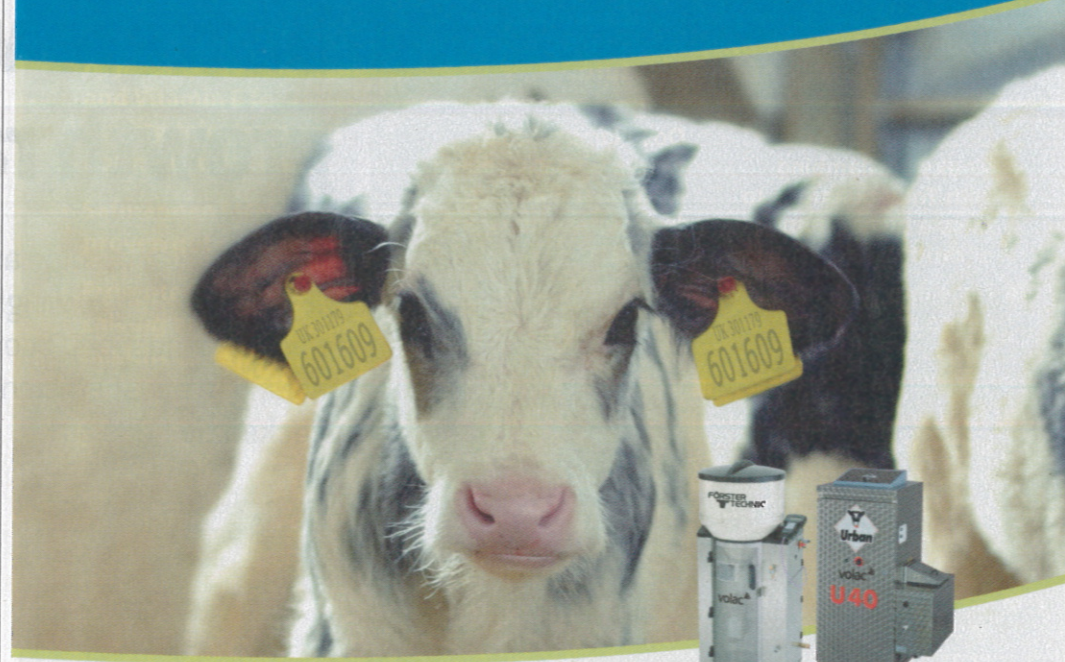
"They are not quite as good as we think they are as not everyone

has access and these are a key pillar of scanning surveillance. If we just subsidise diagnostics and not everyone has access to it, it's not very fair," he said.

An advisory group has been set up to generate ideas about how to organise surveillance.

One of the recommendations to date has been to offer surveillance services at Centres of Excellences across the UK. The recommendations will be put forward to the CEO of AHVLA next month, before going forward to the new Animal Health and Welfare Board.

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EU proposals on antimicrobial use by the first quarter of next year, with the issue expected to be settled by 2014, when there will be a period of time for member states to implement the changes.

The changing face of veterinary services

* The veterinary profession has changed significantly since the early "Herriot days", with conflict between private demand and public good creating challenges.

Vet Jonathan Statham of Bishopston Veterinary Group, Yorkshire explained how things that may be good for public such as surveillance services aren't always profitable for the vet practice.

However, results from a survey of practices found vets do earn money in different ways, with an average of 41% of vet profits coming from