



HEALTHIER HERD HEALTHIER PROFITS

An educational initiative brought to you by MSD Animal Health working with the UK's farm vets

Part Five:

Roundtable discussion

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Should a high health herd status be recognised more readily in the auction ring and should it command a premium? This was the topic up for discussion at a roundtable meeting, held as part of the MSD-sponsored Healthier Herd, Healthier Profits initiative. **Louise Hartley** reports.

Focusing on the value of high health herd status

WITH diseases such as BVD, IBR, leptospirosis and bovine TB becoming an insidious drain on cattle farmers' profits, could more be done across the industry to help livestock farmers capture the value of high health status? A roundtable discussion held at Craven Cattle Marts, Skipton, chaired by Farmers Guardian's livestock editor Katie Jones, brought together an industry group to discuss the issues surrounding the topic of high health herd status and its potential positive rewards for farmers.

Q Are farmers aware of the level of disease in their own units, and do they understand the impact this is having on their bottom line?

David Graveston: Subconsciously, farmers probably are aware of their disease status, but whether they know exactly how much they have, and of what, is debatable.

Some farmers know exactly what diseases they have because of regular testing, but there are still too many ostriches about with their heads in the sand.

There are also those who believe a little bit of infection causes some immunity. This is a misconception, especially with a disease such as BVD. A low incidence of BVD in a herd is a ticking time-bomb.

Henry Rowntree: One of the biggest problems are 'Saturday farmers', of which, there is a tremendous number.

These part-time farmers, who have a few sheep or cattle, are less likely to engage with a vet or any disease control – and this is a huge problem if we try to roll out a disease prevention strategy.

They are often left behind and are difficult to reach. Saturday markets are the best place to catch them. The message needs to stem from the auctions, but whether they will be

interested in engaging is another matter.

Andy Barrett: There has been a big change towards prevention of disease and knowing the status of the stock.

There is a historic tolerance of certain health issues, but that is changing as the industry comes into the hands of a smaller number of professional farmers with a growing interest in high health.

It has to be driven by economics, legislation and the demands of buyers. If legislation doesn't come, premiums in the auctions will be the ultimate driver.

Matt Haslam: It is sometimes perceived more painful to write out a cheque for a vaccine than realise the slow endemic losses which are occurring from the disease in the first place.

There is a perception vaccination schemes will not give a return on investment because it does not directly relate to pounds, shillings and pence.

If we build a system where properly vaccinated animals command a greater value, it will encourage farmers to realise the potential of vaccination.



The participants in the roundtable discussion held at Craven Cattle Marts, Skipton, (left to right): Matt Haslam, Jeremy Eaton, Clive Brown, Andy Barrett, David Graveston, Stephen Wyrill, Jo Speed, Henry Rowntree, Katie Jones and Ted Ogden. PICTURES: Adrian Legge

Clive Brown: Many farmers are no longer using the vet as the fire fighter, but rather involving them in a proactive way to look at what problems they have got.

They are working with the vet to address potential issues, rather than just using them when it all goes wrong.

The driver for this has been the value of stock increasing during the last three to four years. It is all about what farmers are prioritising.

When they have a list a mile long, it is only common sense to tackle to most financially important factors.

Jo Speed: Best practice knowledge needs to be filtered down to farmers and the levy boards can play a big part in that.

From a health perspective, we can help highlight the priorities which are specific to their business.



The information in this series was provided by MSD Animal Health, makers of Bovilis® BVD, Bovilis® IBR Marker Live, Bovilis® IBR Marker Inac and Leptavoid™-H. Always use medicines responsibly. Farmers are advised to consult with their vet about disease control issues.

Further information is available from MSD Animal Health, Walton Manor, Walton, Milton Keynes MK7 7AJ.
T: 01908 685 685 F: 01865 685 555 E: vet-support.uk@merck.com W: www.msd-animal-health.co.uk

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Q How much understanding is there within the auction mart environments about the value of high health status and disease risk?

Ted Ogden: Over several years we have worked closely with vets in our area and have been very conscious of the health of the animals coming through the ring, particularly because of the nature of the stock we sell.

A while ago we recognised the drive towards high health status was not a six or 12-month project, but it was something we would have to constantly work on over the next decade to change the opinions of farmers.

Jeremy Eaton: As well as us here at CCM, I'm sure the more northern markets are conscious of encouraging vendors with high health to bring their stock to keep to Scottish trade coming in.

Stephen Wyrill: When we have bought animals in the past, we have asked our vet to talk to the vet of the cattle owner. If their herd health status matches ours, then we will buy the cattle.

There are some farmers who feel uncomfortable about discussing their vaccination schemes and herd health history because they believe they are being accused of having poor herd health.

But on the contrary, the more information the farmer gives, the more chance they have at selling, and selling at a premium.

David Graveston: I trade cattle through 16 different auction marts throughout the country, predominantly selling my rare breed cattle into Ireland and Scotland.

Buyers will only take my stock if

they are BVD tested and vaccinated. There is no assurance scheme or certification with it, it is only my word.

I can give them the results from the BVD tag test, but in reality, I have nothing to guarantee the animal has been vaccinated, only my medicine book. It is all about building trust up between myself and the buyer.

When I am buying in the market I have to be assured in my own head and heart that those animals are fit to take home. If the vendor does not know his own herd health status I will walk away.

Andy Barrett: Especially with a disease such as BVD, we have moved from a position of lack of interest in health to an increasing interest, but there is an over reliance on vaccination as a tool.

There are so many other factors which impact on the likelihood of disease, such as the stress of sale.

You need to know the status of cattle with BVD before vaccinating them. Therefore, how do you know the information at the point of sale?

There is a world of different between animals in a CHeCS [Cattle Health Certification Standards] accredited animal health scheme, where the herd is being comprehensively monitored, free from disease and vaccination is added in to protect the animals before they are sold on.

I do not know how you get that depth of knowledge across, whether it be via pen cards or encouraging people to research properly beforehand.



Q Where should the incentive for a high health herd status come from?

Jeremy Eaton: Buyers and breeders are interrogating the background of the animals and want to know their origin and health history more than ever before.

The quickest way to adapt to a new high health system is to actually see a tangible benefit – dairy farmers can see it and beef farmers are increasingly become aware of it.

Andy Barrett: Pressure comes from lots of areas and one is the major retailers. They do not want to be seen to be stocking meat which could potentially come from a diseased animal.

They may not have a major part to play, but they are very conscious of their image and how the public perceives them, so that pressure will come if the situation gets worse.



Q What needs to happen to improve the value of herd health status?

Matt Haslam: The value of vaccinated animals and animals from herds which are proactive with tackling endemic diseases must be present at every single stage of the sale process. Whether they are leaving the farm for sale or hanging on a butcher's hook, their health status should be recognised.

Clive Brown: More encouragement for farmers to provide more information about their disease status at the point of sale and the increasing awareness of an animal's health status when it goes through the ring, whether it is premium or commercial stock.

Andy Barrett: I would like to see buyers ask more questions to vendors about their disease status and think about the implications this will have on their herd.

Jo Speed: Ensuring there is a strong collaboration within the



industry is key. More needs to be done to filter evidence-based research down to farmers to help them make the right decisions for their business.

Henry Rowntree: I would like all the proposals from Defra's new TB strategy adopted. We need to engage with each other on a greater level to prevent TB spreading into low-risk areas.

Stephen Wyrill: I want to see more education and less bias to help farmers understand the health problems they have and understand how a low health status could potentially prove costly for the business.

Ted Ogden: Vendors need to understand the value of connecting with their customers. They need to be encouraged to connect with them through

the auctioneer and catalogue.

I would like buyers to pass information back to the vendor – if the animal has done really well with its new owner, the buyer should tell the vendor.

Vendors who keep their stock healthy and protected from disease should see an increase in demand for their stock, and therefore a premium.

Or the opposite, if the animal has gone wrong, then talk to the seller and encourage them to improve their health standards.

David Graveston: Health is best. Honest knowledge and vaccination is the key to improving herd health on national level.

Jeremy Eaton: I see the livestock market as an important part of the long-term future of healthy farming. We will continue to be at pains to ensure buyers go away happy. The more we can go as auctioneers to encourage farmers to raise the ante on health status the better.

The panel



Andy Barrett: Senior vet at the Kingsway practice, Skipton.



Clive Brown: Eblex northern senior regional manager.



Jeremy Eaton: General manager at Craven Cattle Marts (CCM), Skipton. He oversees the general day-to-day running and strategy of the company and is responsible for selling the feeding bulls.



David Graveston: A tenant farmer from Gisburn, Lancashire, who predominantly rears Holstein Friesian heifers which are sold through local markets. The farm is also home to several rare breeds of cattle and sheep.



Matt Haslam: Veterinary adviser for MSD.



Katie Jones: Livestock editor at Farmers Guardian.



Ted Ogden: Auctioneer at CCM with responsibility for livestock and farm sales. Ted has been an auctioneer for the past 20 years, working for three different firms across the north of England.



Henry Rowntree: Beef and sheep farmer from Gisburn, Lancashire. He runs the 140-head Ribble Park pedigree Aberdeen-Angus breeding herd and 440 North Country Cheviot Mules. Henry is also the current council delegate for West Riding NFU.



Jo Speed: DairyCo extension officer for the north. Farming with her husband in the North East, Jo is a Nuffield Scholar, specialising in lameness.



Stephen Wyrill: Dairy, beef and arable farmer from near Richmond and national chairman of the Tenant Farmers Association.

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For more information and to watch a video of the Healthier Herd Healthier Profits roundtable discussion, visit www.farmersguardian.com/healthierherd

