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Focus on prevention, not cure

Jonathan Reader

Vet services director, Synergy Farm Health

Synergy Farm Health is one of the largest farm and veterinary practices in the country. As one of its founding directors, Jonathan Reader can be rightly proud of the service that its 28 vet surgeons and nine vet technicians provide the hundreds of clients they serve in the south-west of England.

It's a business with a multi-million-pound turnover formed by the merger of Kingfisher and Southfield vet practices, he explains: "Our objective was to create a dedicated specialist farm animal service for the South West."

Jonathan sits on the Synergy board and has direct responsibility for the vet techs, research and consultancy as well as conducting routine vet work for 25 dairy and beef clients and specialist consultancy and training on lameness in dairy cattle.

The words "farm health" are a critical aspect of the identity of the business, explains Jonathan. It's about prevention, rather than

cure. "Traditionally, practices make their money from selling drugs, but last month the fees for our services overtook the revenues from products," he says.

At the heart of this drive to deliver "healthy animals" that are not reliant on medicine are the team of vet technicians, who are trained to deliver key specialist services such as foot-trimming, mobility scoring, freeze branding, heifer weighing, udder singeing, blood sampling and many other on-farm tasks. The practice is now extending the service to aid heat detection and AI relief.

"There's a real resistance in some practices to non-vets doing this type of work, but with the right training, we feel it delivers a better outcome and a much more cost-effective solution to our customers," says Jonathan. The practice also employs its own lab and clinical vet technician.

On the back of these services Synergy has developed its own software system (Herd Keeper) to use data to identify practical solutions. The initiative has now been embraced by the industry and purchased by other practices, foot trimmers and organisations. DairyCo and the SAC are using it to extract genetics and lameness correlations.

All the vets and vet technicians have "rubber-protected" laptops, enabling them to access reports on-

KEY FACTS

- ★ Director of Synergy Farm Health and practising vet for 16 years
- ★ 300 Synergy clients with 25 dairy and beef businesses under his direct control
- ★ Specialist on lameness and sits on industry committees and boards

THE JUDGES LIKED

- ★ Combines practical hands-on client experience with a strategic vision for the practice
- ★ Innovating to find cost-effective, high-quality solutions for his clients
- ★ A key influence within the industry

farm. Data and lab results are also instantly communicated via mobile phone apps. Jonathan is keen to use technology as much as possible to speed diagnosis and cure, improve client services and efficiency while also reducing costs.

And the attention to detail given to his clients' herds is clearly paying off. The percentage of lameness in Synergy-managed herds varies from 1-25%, compared with the national average of 36%.

He cites past *Farmers Weekly*

Dairy Farmer of the Year Neil Baker as a good example of how regular mobility scoring, preventative trimming, staff training and data analysis can dramatically reduce lameness, which in this herd went from 25% to 5% and is still falling.

A significant amount of his time is spent collaborating with industry, such as the University of Nottingham Dairy Herd Health Group, DairyCo's lameness steering group and various educational establishments. Making the link between research and practice is a critical aspect of his job, he says.

He is spending a week in the USA on a foot-trimming course with an acknowledged global specialist and has recently returned from France after investigating a heat detection and calving alert system. "It's so important to keep learning and challenge perceived wisdom if needs be," he says.

Knowledge transfer inside, and outside, the practice is an important part of his role. This takes the form of weekly meetings where specialists in certain areas can feed back new ideas and thinking to all members of staff, as well as speaking engagements at industry conferences across the country.

He takes the role of nurturing future generations of vets and farmers seriously by giving talks and support to young graduates and YFCs.

