

# DO NOT DISTURB!

**Duncan Berkshire** (MA VetMB MSc CertPM MRCVS), from XL Vets' Bishopton Veterinary Group, takes a close look at high pre-weaning mortality rates and suggests some improvements to management and husbandry that should help to reduce it

## QUESTION:

Our pre-weaning mortality is always running higher than we would like, at around 20%, and is a big issue on our unit. We have had several investigations to find out what disease problems are present, but all have drawn a blank. It is frustrating since good pigs are also being lost – not just poor ones. Any suggestions to help would be gratefully received.

## ANSWER:

Pre-weaning mortality is a major worry on most units, whatever their current level, since it is an easily measured and recordable figure and so it is all too obvious when it changes. It has a direct impact on throughput of pigs to the finishing section, or for sale, and so it also has a direct financial effect on the farm business.

A rate of 20% is certainly higher than the normal level expected on a stable and well-managed unit. If you and your vet have already ruled out the major infectious causes, through post mortems and further diagnostics, then it is likely that a management issue is causing your problem and this needs to be investigated.

In fact, disease is usually the cause of mortality in fewer than 20% of all deaths within the farrowing house.

## NOTE WHEN DEATHS ARE OCCURRING

The first thing to do would be to note when the deaths are occurring – is it during the first two or three days, or later?

Poorly viable and starved piglets make up a surprisingly large proportion of those piglets that die during the first few days of life and, often, this can be linked to how the sow or gilt has been prepared during late pregnancy before she enters the farrowing house.

Nutrition during late pregnancy and overall body condition can have a dramatic effect during the



**“Any disturbance to the sows’ lying habits can allow piglets to get underneath them and lead to them inadvertently being laid upon”**

farrowing period. This should be discussed more fully with your nutritionist, but there are some general rules to keep in mind.

The final three to four weeks of pregnancy are when a lot of energy is diverted into the piglets within the uterus, influencing both their bodyweight and size at birth, and the energy that they have within

their bodies to get up and move.

Overly large piglets at birth can cause a mismatch with the smaller birth canals, particularly in gilts, meaning a slow protracted farrowing and a lower viability piglet since it is, in effect, holding its breath during the whole process from inside the uterus to the outside world. That said, too little energy during the late stage of pregnancy can be just as detrimental because the piglets will farrow well but then have no energy to move around to suckle from the sow's udder.

## OVERALL FAT DEPOSITS

The body condition of the sows and gilts gives a good indication of overall fat deposits within the adult animal prior to farrowing. Overly conditioned animals (3.5+) will lay fat down within the birth canal through the pelvis and this,

if severely narrowed, will impede the farrowing process in the same way that a large piglet would, as noted above.

This is even more important with gilts and body condition should be assessed at several points throughout pregnancy to make sure that all sows and gilts are on the correct track.

Modern genetics mean that sows are designed to produce a huge amount of milk from their feed in order to suckle a large number of piglets through to good weaning weights. This is fantastic during the later stages of lactation before weaning, but can cause big issues just after farrowing where piglets find it difficult to suck the milk from a heavily engorged mammary gland.

Sow intakes during the point of farrowing are very important to get right, and very easy to get



Duncan Berkshire

wrong, in order that your piglets can suck well and avoid starvation or being laid on as they try to get milk from their mothers.

The attitude of your sows and gilts within the farrowing house can have a big influence on mortality, since another significant cause of death is from being laid on by the sow within the pen – this is more commonly the cause of death of piglets later on during the lactation period. Any disturbance to the sows' lying habits can allow piglets to get underneath them and lead to them inadvertently being laid upon.

Noises and large temperature

changes can make sows get up more frequently, as will reactions to stock people as they move around the unit.

Radios can be useful for masking sudden noises, while the more habituated you can get your breeding animals to humans the calmer they will be. This is the process of humanisation and needs to be started as early as possible with the gilts – studies have shown that just five minutes a couple of times a week spent calmly with a group of gilts has benefits for their stillborn rates, pre-weaning mortality and feed intakes.

## OUTDOOR FARROWING

Although you haven't mentioned whether you are an indoor or outdoor production unit, the points above are just as applicable to outdoor farrowing paddocks with regards to the correct feeding and humanisation of the adults.

In addition, bedding within the arcs is very important to get right, since banking of the straw will lead to piglets rolling underneath the sow as she lies down. Farrowing beds need to be sufficient to insulate the piglets from the ground and reduce draughts through creating a warm microclimate, but

not deep enough to cause rooting of the bedding by the sow and, therefore, the banking of the straw.

Disturbance to the sows within the arcs at the point of farrowing and early lactation will lead to increased overlaid piglets, so minimal human intervention at this point should be exercised if possible. Certain wildlife, for example foxes, can also give increased mortality through disturbance of the

sows and increased overlaid piglets, so control should be undertaken to minimise their exposure on the field.

Although some mortality within the pre-weaning period is unavoidable to a certain extent, with a little investigation into working out when and how this is occurring, there are often several things that can be done to reduce it to a more manageable level.



## Ask the vet...

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