

It pays to check what ails animals before treatment

What's a magic bullet?

For those that don't know (or don't remember!) the magic bullet story was the hunt for a medicine to treat syphilis without having side effects so bad as to kill the sufferer. Well that word caught on and everyone was after "magic bullets" – a jab, a drench, a tablet, "something in a bottle" to "cure the problem" whatever it might be – and there lay a few problems!

What is the problem you're trying to "cure"?

So often treatment is blind. As time passes, this starts to look more and more ridiculous, for example injecting antibiotic into an animal that may not even have a bacterial infection, or starting to vaccinate against a disease which is not a risk for your farm! It's reminiscent of the real olden days when Rinderpest outbreaks were treated with burning crosses tied to cow's horns.

So how do you know what you've got?

Rather than asking for a bottle of something it seems that we're all far

MAGIC BULLET

Roger Scott, of Scott Mitchell Associates, looks at how to best prevent expensive treatments that might not even be needed

more converted to the mentality of trying to diagnose problems – sure this will often be from a basic clinical examination, but more often than not these days we're expected to "run some tests" – find out what really is going on.

What sort of tests do we commonly run?

There's the individual sick animal for a start – what sort of things might we look for?

The downer cow is worth testing for magnesium, calcium and phosphate – or are you just going to give it its seventh bottle of calcium? It might be overloaded with calcium – we just can't tell without testing.

What about the scouring cow – who remembers the L'Oréal hair spray advert? – "is she or isn't she?"

Well – has she got Johne's or not? We have a test for that!

Worse still there's the group situation. For example, your lambs are scouring, so you decide to treat for coccidiosis – seriously! Without actually knowing? You can easily test for it and potentially save a load of time and money and more importantly find out why they are scouring and take correct action.

What's the point, we never get a result?

There really is a wealth of information available to us, but we have to be sure we're taking the right samples at the right time from the right animals and getting them processed promptly. It's a common frustration for farmers to get a negative result – but remember a genuine negative

result is actually a very useful piece of information – it rules something out that you were suspecting.

But sometimes the vet says even if it's negative it might be positive.

There are some very difficult conversations to be had around test results where the test is suspected of throwing up a false negative, for example saying the disease isn't there when it actually is.

A good example of this is when a cow tests positive for Johne's but then at the retest is negative. It is most likely that the second test was a false negative because what we know of the Johne's test is – if it's positive, it really is, if it's negative, it might not be! Confused? Don't blame you. The scientists among you might want to google the difference between the sensitivity and the specificity of a test – good luck.

What's the take-home message?

Thankfully, you guys are more likely to ask for a test these days than a "bottle of something".



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