

# Co-operating for cattle health

THE winter meeting of the British Cattle Veterinary Association was held jointly in collaboration with the National Farmers Union in its head office at Stoneleigh in Warwickshire. Veterinary surgeons and farmers discussed common issues with representatives of organisations and policy-makers.

The room was full and the day had three segments of: cattle health, the changing face of veterinary services and the contribution from the levy bodies.

Gwyn Jones from the NFU introduced the first session and emphasised the need for the cattle industry to retain the

goodwill of the public. National disease outbreaks have led to public distrust of the industry in the past but recent management of bluetongue has demonstrated good and successful control.

Major current issues are TB and the outbreak of Schmallenberg virus. Disease surveillance and the costs of disease control are continuing areas of co-operation. Tim Brigstocke detailed the work of the Cattle Health and Welfare Group with four identified priorities of: farm health planning; BVD; surveillance; and reporting and dairy cow welfare.

He noted that 71% of livestock farmers had a farm health plan and that 41% of them used their plan to inform disease management decisions. Costs and losses were being identified with 8% of calves born dead or dying within 24 hours; 86% of dairy heifers had a calf and of those 15% were culled before their second lactation.

Farmers appreciated plans directed at specific issues. Some 14,000 cattle farmers were involved in some form of monitoring and control for BVD, Johne's, IBR and Lepto. The CheCS scheme had taken several years to be taken up but there was increasing interest.

## Progress report

The first year progress report of the Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy is now available and reports encouraging progress in 10 areas of disease control with measured targets. The longevity of UK dairy cows is similar to suckler cows with around 8% of both being in their 8th year.

The UK is not following the US growth, with 2,000 cows being the largest herd size and fewer than 10% of cows being housed all year round.

In the spring of 2012 a document outlining the current state of cattle health and welfare in GB is to be published. A great deal of data has been offered to be considered, some of which is conflicting, but direction will be given that it is hoped will lead to sustainable and profitable cattle farming.

Delivering facts to replace misconceptions is one aim. Surveillance and monitoring is key and

## RICHARD GARD

reports on the wide-ranging presentations at last month's joint meeting of the BCVA and the NFU

information is needed to identify why 240,000 adult cattle die each year from unknown causes. There is some realism here, where a list of symptoms also includes "no symptoms just died".

## Resistant infections

Amy Gray, the author of the NFU policy report, *Antibiotics in Agriculture*, outlined the supply and use of medicines in the UK and Europe. There is a problem with antibiotic resistant infections in the human population but there is a lack of data on whether the use of the same actives in animals is a cause.

Politicians, however, are acting in a precautionary way and looking to reduce the use of antibiotics for animals.

Potential changes include a legal reduction in the amount of antibiotics used on farm, banning of fluoroquinolones and 3rd/4th generation cephalosporins, banning prophylactic use, banning vets from selling the antibiotics they prescribe and banning the advertising of antibiotics to farmers.

Despite various scientific pointers that resistance is due to misuse by humans and that the withdrawal of product from animal use has not reduced human incidence, the reality is that the responsible use of medicines in agriculture has to be carried out.

Step forward John Fitzgerald, formerly with the VMD and now with RUMA, to address the future use of medicines.

He stated that antimicrobial resistance is a global issue and cannot be sorted out by one country or one group: "We need to all work together." The European Union has produced a Commission Action Plan,



Speakers Andrew Prail, Jonathan Statham, Nigel Gibbens and Pat Kirwan.

he said, and recommendations will follow for prudent antibiotic use in veterinary medicine. Emphasis is being placed on the need for surveillance and education.

In the UK the incidence of MRSA is falling in hospitals following improved hygiene. The big issue for vets is that medicines must not be used as a substitute for good farm management. The debate should centre on what should be done to make sure that medicines are being used as second-line action not first-line.

There are major differences from the medical use in that, for farmers, medicines are a business use and their application is influenced by business necessities. It is important that economic drivers do not detract from responsible use.

Veterinary surgeons are requested to talk to MEPs, as they require information about the realities and the real need for the use of medicines in livestock, with the aim of overcoming emotional responses.

## Changes in services

Andrew Prail, the BCVA president, introduced the session on change in veterinary services. In introducing the CVO, he mentioned that Nigel Gibbens was one of the few veterinary surgeons left in DEFRA.

The establishment of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England was fully covered by the CVO, who urged veterinary surgeons and farmers to engage with the Board, which is at the centre of Government business. The individuals on the board are not representatives of organisations and it is "not a club of vested interests", he said.

The current DEFRA budget is about £243 million which will fall to less than £200 million in 2014/15, with TB accounting for close to a third of the annual spend.

The board will need to achieve the budget aims, as well as building trust and working partnerships between government and animal keepers, improve the welfare of kept animals, encourage innovation, alternative approaches and best practice, work towards self-reliance by animal keepers with strategic government support and redefine the roles and responsibilities of government and

animal keepers.

The ways of working by the board to achieve better animal welfare will change as vets and others interact with the members.

The need for and the benefits of animal health surveillance were also presented by the CVO. He showed a prediction graph indicating that if BSE had not been controlled in cattle and sheep there would have been a major escalation of human deaths from vCJD. There were very real negative impacts to cattle and beef exports with a slump that lasted for the best part of a decade.

These examples, together with detection of the spread of bovine psoroptic mange, highlighted the need for surveillance to protect public health, support industry, the economy and to protect animal welfare, the CVO said.

## Collaboration

There is a need for collaboration from animal owners to involve vets in diagnosis, with information coming through from abattoirs and a requirement for effective laboratory services. The current location of AHVLA diagnostic facilities does not cover some of the important areas of livestock population.

The Sustainable Surveillance Project has reviewed viable options for better surveillance and proposals are being considered. There will be changes, with a report due to be presented to the board in March, which will lead to discussions, engagement and then ministerial approval prior to implementation.

Nigel Gibbens recognised that there will be difficulties with change, but it also had to be recognised that the current system has weaknesses and surveillance inadequacies.

Current and recent threats have highlighted the need for improvement and veterinary practices are urged to become involved in all that is required for their area.

## Services needed

Jonathan Statham from Ripon used many pictures of his family and animals to emphasise that veterinary practices recognise the veterinary services that will be needed in the future. Evoking the Lowe report, Charles Darwin, James Herriott and



others, he illustrated the continuing need for change.

High-achieving young vets expect to work within a positive industry and the profession needs to retain top talent, he said. Veterinary practices are building a team approach and a wide range of income has been highlighted by the BCVA Business Models Working Group.

Income from veterinary medicines in cattle practice, for example, varies between practices of from 10% to 85% and income from Government from 1% to 40%. Clearly there is no one size fits all template to be taken forward.

Practices are considering the private demand from farmer clients and the work involving the public good. The value from different aspects of veterinary work may not be good for the practice as a business and this needs to be identified and addressed.

In developing veterinary-farmer partnerships it is important to recognise that every farmer has a different set of needs. The challenge is to communicate and listen and for the individual veterinary surgeon to “prove your worth every day”.

### Lively session

Looking at future working was already

proving to be a lively session and it was about to get even livelier. Pat Kirwan referred to racing analogies in outlining disease control in Ireland.

Explaining that the poultryman knows it, the pigman does it, the horseman can spell it, the cattleman thinks it a new disease and the sheepman knows nothing about it, Pat outlined the ambitions for Irish farming tempered with a very difficult economic situation.

Looking forward to the removal of milk quotas in 2015, the view expressed by the Irish farmer is “if it can stand, mate it”. Food Harvest 2020 is targeting a 50% increase in milk production and a 40% increase in beef. Technical working groups have been formed to look into disease issues and their recommendations are to be fed into implementation groups.

Long-term schemes are being developed and stakeholders are being asked for a 10-year commitment on IBR and Johne’s disease. There are important funding issues with a balance between Government and industry with the Government expected to reduce financial input.

There are issues, with some groups and commercial interests doing their own thing which may lead to different schemes for the same disease rather than a co-ordinated

approach. This is where the galloping, cantering, number of laps, hurdles, jumps and falls outlined some of the dangers.

Veterinary surgeons have become actively engaged on a voluntary basis with Animal Health Ireland and this is to the benefit of practices and all stakeholders. Farmers are more involved in disease control in an area or over the industry rather than on the one farm.

Having listened to the earlier talks on the UK developments, Pat observed that the UK “had too many people to talk to and too many stakeholder interests”. The experience from Ireland is that it is enough to have vets, farmers and government only.

### Levy bodies

Catherine McLaughlin introduced the final session on the role of the levy bodies and a more detailed account of the activities of DairyCo will be highlighted later in *Veterinary Practice*. Elizabeth Berry gave an update on the Healthy Feet Programme which now involves 66 mentors with 11 more undergoing training.

Mentors are vets or category one foot trimmers and they work with the farmer on a one-to-one basis and are paid by him. Roll out is by “slow

burn” and 88 farms are currently having mentoring.

Requests for mobility scoring are being received and the Healthy Feet mentors may become involved in training paraprofessionals for mobility scoring. A research partnership programme has been developed and a trial of treatment for white line disease and sole ulcer has commenced in collaboration with University of Nottingham.

Further cow intervention studies, herd intervention studies and scientific research based interventions are being discussed.

There is an active EBLEX involvement with veterinary practices and Chris Lloyd detailed the Healthy Returns Programme. Bulletins and technical information are sent to 21,000 producers and veterinary surgeons are invited to request copies.

Some practices use the literature within discussion groups and farm meetings and veterinary surgeon training sessions have been held at VLA sites with laboratory facilities. ■ This meeting covered a wide range of topics, many of which are being discussed and debated in the near future.

Copies of the proceedings are available from the BCVA office (e-mail office@cattlevet.co.uk).