The future-proofing of cattle veterinary practice was one of the major themes covered at last year’s British Cattle Veterinary Association congress, and this was expressed by the president, Gareth Hateley, in his opening address.

There is concern about the next few months with dairying and the long-term management of effective practice. The first speaker, Joep Dreissen (Cow Signals), indicated clearly that there was much more veterinary surgeons could be involved in that will reduce feelings of farmer insecurity.

The speaker covered a great deal of points very rapidly and in order to assimilate his observations in full it is necessary to purchase copies of the Cow Signals books. Essentially the approach is to consider feed, water, air, light and space and to double the lifetime of the cow.

A stress-free calving line for three weeks before and three weeks after calving is important, with the cow having “plenty of space” in the last days before calving.

Technology is available to the farmer to offer a greater feeling of control including coughing calves identified two weeks before the ear of the farmer, cameras to show an empty rumen, measuring eye depth, recording the colour of urine and detecting dull skin.

Automatic sensor technology is available and affordable. A cattle vet should be achieving 80% prevention/consultancy and 20% treatment. Farmers listen to other farmers more than they listen to vets and the challenge is for vets to be better educators.

The use of next generation gene sequencing for mastitis pathogens. This technology is expected to become very much cheaper and available over the next three years. Initial trials have shown that detecting bacterial DNA has identified anaerobic bacteria in clinical samples (e.g. Sneathia sanuganginens) and organisms that are difficult to isolate by culture, on-farm is recorded and reviewed according to the resistance patterns detected. Approximately 200 samples have been analysed to date from seven herds with from 0 to 2.7% ESBL isolates.

Early lactation foot-trimming of dairy heifers has been evaluated by Oli Maxwell (University of Nottingham) in a randomised controlled trial. A surprising level of heifer sole bruising was an initial finding. Sole ulcer was recorded in 16% of the heifers and a further 16% were lame from other conditions.

Hoof trimming at 50 to 80 days post-calving did not show a milk yield increase for the heifer groups but individual animals benefitted from being trimmed. Lame heifers that were left untrimmed were at risk from subsequent culling.

Medicines
Three speakers contributed to the difficult topic of the responsible use of medicines. Prof. David Barrett (University of Bristol) provided a medicine use overview.

The indications are that veterinary surgeons need to be particularly careful when prescribing medicines that do not have a species-specific withdrawal period, with compulsory withdrawal periods then applying of seven days for milk and 28 days for meat. It is now specifically prohibited to advertise antimicrobial medicines to farmers and other animal keepers.

There is a lack of information about the exact use of medicines on-farm. The collection of data, for product use in multiple species, does not indicate the volumes administered to cattle or sheep.

Animal dose levels are often underestimated for heavier animals (over 500kg) and overestimated for lighter animals (below 150kg). Under-dosing is a concern for potential development of resistance.

The thrust is that the profession should avoid using veterinary medicines, especially antibiotics, to facilitate the use of suboptimal husbandry methods unless such use may be unavoidable to safeguard animal welfare.

Vaccine use in most instances is preferable to use of medication and is to be encouraged. Veterinary and other bodies are offering an increasing depth of information and support. The pressure will increase for a change in prescribing and recording whether the science supports animal resistance transfer to humans or not.

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