

MAKE YOUR COWS TALK TO YOU

Have you ever wished your cows could talk so they could tell you how they were feeling, and what they thought of how you were looking after them? I am sure some of you are pleased they cannot - but others would love to know. I cannot make this happen but I can do the next best thing, through metabolic profiles from The Dairy Herd Health and Productivity Service (DHHPS) at Edinburgh. And what's more, I regard this service as the best value in dairy farming today.



How do we assess how well we are looking after our cows? We start by taking forage samples and build rations with the aid of clever diet programmes. We follow this by examining statistical results for milk production, milk fat & protein, dry matter intake, fertility efficiency and health issues. If you are lucky, your feed advisor will also get out of the warm dry kitchen and review body condition change, faeces consistency, rumen fill, the appearance of the diet and general cow behaviour. This is all well and good. But if things start to go wrong it is usually too late and the financial damage has already been done.

We need to know what we are doing wrong before it becomes apparent and the only way to do this is to ask the cows.

They will tell us through blood profiling:

- Their energy status
- If they are losing weight too quickly
- Their protein status
- Their mineral and trace element status
- The occurrence of recent mastitis, lameness and metritis

It can point to why things are wrong and suggest how to remedy the situation. The results also indicate how much milk from forage is being achieved.

If your pre calvers are unhappy with their diet, you can find out and put it right. How would you know otherwise until milk yield or fertility is compromised? Is the problem with the pre calvers or the early lactation cows? How many times have you been disappointed with results and tinkered with the diet to no avail, and spent money doing it? Remember, by the time you see it, it's too late!

I have used the DHHPS service to save money in other ways. Mineral and trace element status is reported and we can refute salesmen's inference of a need for expensive products. Reducing mineral costs by over 50% is a common result.

Mid lactation cows can be challenged to produce high levels of milk from grazing and blood profiling will tell us if we are being too hard on them. If results are good we are utilising a low cost feed effectively, and feel comfortable in the knowledge we are nutritionally correct.

Sounds brilliant doesn't it? So why isn't it used more widely? Well it isn't the cost - A one off test will cost £180, and annual membership is £480 per annum for 4-5 tests. The same tests with a veterinary laboratory would cost over £600. And the information would be only a fraction compared with the DHHPS. I have seen many blood results from other sources that have profiled insufficient animals and/or at the wrong stage of lactation and are thus practically worthless.

Some detractors say it is pointless profiling high yielding cows in early lactation as they are guaranteed to be energy deficient if producing 50 litres plus at 10-20 days calved. They are wrong. I have tested cows at this stage with an average yield of 54 litres - all energy stable, and this is not uncommon.

I think the reason lies elsewhere. There is a need for the feed advisor to be involved. Their duties include weigh banding and condition scoring of each cow tested. Data on feeding, milk yield etc is recorded to accompany the blood samples. The results take this information into account in a written report. The results and report are used to instigate a course of action.

I suspect feed advisors do not promote the service because of some or all of these reasons:

- You get cow muck over you when weigh banding and condition scoring
- A lack of knowledge on how to condition score
- Fear their rationing skills will be challenged
- Fear their compounds will be challenged if blood energy levels are low
- Illustrates no need for fancy minerals and magic potions and kills a sale
- Lack of knowledge on profile parameters from the report
- Demands a solution from them if there is a problem

I have been using this service for almost 25 years and have learnt more about dairy cow nutrition from this service than from any other source.

I repeat - I regard this service as the best value in dairy farming today.

Ask your feed advisor why they have not promoted the service.

Start listening to your cows.

HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE DHHPS

Metabolic profiles had been started in the 1960's at the Institute of Animal Health at Compton but withered from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the findings, lengthy turn-round times and yards of computer output for each herd test. This is where, in the 1970's, the University of Edinburgh Dick Vet School's Professor Gordon Ferguson and lecturer Jim Kelly, came in.

Gordon Ferguson found in Spillers Agriculture Ltd an organisation from the feed side with a similar view. Together they started the Dairy Herd Health and Productivity Service (DHHPS), and David Whitaker joined the team in 1978.

With cows and feeding systems changing, it became apparent that for the metabolic profile side to deliver the information required, much greater control on the selection of cows, the timing of tests and the use of background information was (and remains) vital.

Current DHHPS findings show that energy/body condition change problems in late pregnancy and early lactation are the most common constraints. But they also show that 30% of modern high yielding cows don't have such a constraint, and thus can have good fertility and long lives. The most common cause of energy problems is lack of potential total food intake - for whatever reason - and NOT a lack of concentrates. Indeed less concentrates and better management of access to forages or TMRs is often the best nutritional answer.

With the demise of Dalgety Animal Feeds division in the 1990s, the DHHPS became an independent self-funding service within the Dick Vet School at Edinburgh. Alastair Macrae joined the DHHPS team when Jim Kelly stepped down in 2002, and will take over the running of the service when David Whitaker retires at the end of September 2006. The DHHPS philosophy of the team approach to dairy cow health and nutrition remains - providing advice to farmers, vets, nutritional advisors and consultants on all aspects of dairy cow health, productivity and fertility. The service continues to grow, and the DHHPS currently analyses over 8,500 individual cow blood samples each year for metabolic profiles - with results and reports sent to all members of the "on-farm team" within a week of receipt of the samples for rapid feedback on the cows' view of their current feeding arrangements.

To visit the DHHPS website please [click here](#).