

Lame cows, foot rot topics at York dairy day

BY JOYCE BUPP
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DOVER — Scan a dozen veterinary books and you may still never find the description of a condition called "chronic concrete toxicosis."

That's the label applied by Dr. Robert Owen, Dillsburg area veterinarian, to the weakening of the legs and feet of dairy cattle from the stress of constant exposure to concrete floors.

Owens was one of the featured speakers at the York County Dairy Day, held last Thursday at the Dover Fire Hall. About 250 York dairymen and women turned out for the seminar, held in conjunction with the district meeting of Atlantic Breeders Cooperative.

Owen calls bovine lameness a severe economic loss to dairymen

and blames some of the common dairy cow foot problems on trends in breeding.

Postlegged cows, for instance, where the bones of the back leg are too straight, cannot absorb the shock of constant walking on concrete. Cows with too much "set," or angling, in their legs, have too little support, and the bones tend to curve as they try to hold up the weight of the animal.

Both stanchion barns and free-stall layouts create their own unique feet problems for dairy animals.

The hooves of cows tied in stalls, where the feet stay very dry, become hard, difficult to trim, and tend to crack or split more readily.

Animals in the constant moisture of a free-stall operation have chronically wet hooves, which

become soft, and suffer from prolonged exposure to the bacterial organisms present in manure and mud.

While dairy cow foot problems are generally lumped together under the umbrella term "foot rot," the vet says that's a misnomer. According to Owens, there is an actual disease known as "foot rot," but it's one of the rarer things he sees.

True foot rot is an infection at the base of the nail, or hoof, caused by a fusarium bacteria that usually enters through a bruise or an abrasion. The area swells, may crack, and exudes a foul-smelling substance. If untreated, this infection may eventually work its way into the tissues of the foot.

Foot rot is more common in cattle kept in intensive housing, where animals are over-crowded. The organisms that cause foot rot tend to build up, so that the longer

a housing area is in use, the greater the chances for disease problems.

Under-run soil is a foot problem frequently caused by not keeping feet properly trimmed and letting the cow's toes grow long. Fracture lines develop between the sole and the heel, creating openings for the bacterial invasion that can eventually eat away the tissue of the sole.

Like most cattle foot diseases, with an under-run sole the foot becomes swollen and inflamed. Diseased tissue must be peeled away and kept dry through bandaging until new tissue grows to replace it. When the tissue is trimmed out, a sufficient amount of the wall of the hoof, the hard outside area, must be left to support the weight of the cow when she walks.

Another similar condition of sore feet is an ulcer, a small infected spot that will work its way inward. One symptom of ulcers is an area of pink granulated tissue. This is the diseased tissue that must be removed, and the surrounding healthy tissue treated and kept dry.

One treatment used by Owens for an ulcerated toe on a dairy cow is to force the animal's weight on the adjacent toe of the hoof. This can be done by gluing a small, shaped block of wood to the healthy toe, thus raising the infected toe off the contact surface, and removing the stress of walking on it until the toe heals.

Eventually, the cow will wear down the wooden "shoe", but the treated toe should have sufficient time to heal before the cow's full weight is on the entire foot.

Another common foot affliction in cattle is corns, a growth of tissue between the claws, or toes, of the hoof. Corns often accompany the conditions of splayed feet, since the tissue can grow more readily when the toes are spread abnormally.

Owens says the only real solution to severe corn problems is surgery.

Dr. Carl Brown, Berks County nutritionist and former professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute,

was a follow-up speaker and echoed many of the vet's concerns on foot problems.

He also spoke to the connection between problem feet and nutrition, especially in the condition known as "founder." In founder cows, the bone of the foot sometimes grows down through the soft hoof tissue until the bone actually protrudes through the hoof.

Nutritionists tie this condition to excessive carbohydrates in the cow's diet, often in the form of heavily-fed concentrates. Over-feeding with carbohydrates can result in an acidosis condition, with the acid pulling fluids from the cow's system, especially from the foot area, thus weakening the hoof structure to founder.

Topdressing concentrates, or feeding them through a magnetic feeder system, where a minority of the cows eat the bulk of the concentrates, can lead to founder conditions. Overconsumption of high-energy silages can also add to the problem, and feeds must have adequate levels of fiber content.


Two trace minerals linked to hoof strength are sulfur and zinc. Iodine, sometimes given to cattle with salt, is also believed to improve foot conditions, although it must not be overfed.

Both Owen and Brown agreed that good management plays a vital role in keeping foot problems to a minimum. A regular program of foot trimming is a necessity in curtailing foot diseases, and probably the best foot trimmers are those few who pick up hooves.

Trimming tables are helpful in working on the bottom of the hoof, although cows should be on them only for brief periods of time.

Foot baths, especially in free-stall, milking parlor operations, can help cut down on the bacteria buildup on feet. Mudholes in pastures and watering areas should be filled or fenced and slippery feedlots can be improved by grooving or applications of fine grit materials.

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