The use of in-depth interviews to understand the process of treating lame dairy cows from the farmers’ perspective

SV Horsemans†, EJ Roe‡, JN Huxley§, NJ Bell†, CS Mason† and HR Whay†

1 University of Bristol, School of Veterinary Sciences, Langford, Somerset BS40 5DU, UK
2 University of Southampton, University Road, Southampton, Hants SO17 1BJ, UK
3 University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington Campus, Loughborough, Leics LE12 5RD, UK
4 The Royal Veterinary College, University of London, Hawkshead Lane, Hatfield, Herts AL9 7TA, UK
5 Scotland’s Rural College, St Mary’s Industrial Estate, Dumfries DG1 1DX, UK
6 Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: Sue.Horsemans@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

Interventions aimed at improving animal welfare on farms may be more successful if greater attention is paid to the points of view of farmers. For example, understanding how different dairy farmers detect lame cows, decide to treat them, get them to the point of treatment, and how practical considerations that impact on this process may be important for reducing lameness on dairy farms. In-depth interviews with twelve dairy farmers were carried out to explore how this occurred on their farms. This in-depth approach allowed a number of factors influencing lameness treatment to be uncovered. The language used by farmers to describe lameness gave important insight into their perceptions of lameness and into the value they placed on prompt treatment. Farmers’ perceptions of lameness were found to affect the speed of treatment, with treatment of cows perceived to have impaired mobility or to be less severely lame sometimes delayed. Other priorities on the farm, skilled labour availability, farm infrastructure and farmers’ emotional responses to lameness treatment were all found to impact on whether or when a lame cow was treated. In order to encourage farmers to promptly treat all lame cows their perceptions of lameness and the benefits of prompt treatment must be addressed. The language used when communicating with farmers about lameness may be key to achieving this. The practical barriers, such as time and labour constraints, associated with the treatment process, must also be understood, taken into account and seen in the context of the farm management as a whole.

Keywords: animal welfare, dairy cattle, farmer, lameness, qualitative, treatment

Introduction

Welfare improvement requires insight into on-farm practice from the farmers’ point of view. Welfare scientists must appreciate both the farmers’ rationale for managing their stock in the way they do and also what motivates, encourages or prevents them from changing their current practice. Until recently there has been “relatively little attention paid to [experiences of] those [people] who implement [welfare] measures and practices on farm” (Hubbard et al 2007). As such, on the topic of welfare improvements, the voice of the producer has rarely been heard. In this paper, we examine how incorporating the voice of the dairy farmer into research debates about lameness treatment may be vital for tackling this significant welfare problem.

Research suggests that farmers frequently underestimate the number of lame cows in their herds (Whay et al 2003; Leach et al 2010a), that treatment, especially of less severely lame cows can be delayed (Alawweh et al 2012) and that this treatment delay results in increased lameness prevalence (Bell & Huxley 2009; Leach et al 2012). In 2008, DairyCo (the GB dairy levy body), launched a mobility scoring system to help and encourage farmers to both detect and treat a greater proportion of their lame dairy cows. The DairyCo Mobility Scoring system (DairyCo 2012a) was developed by researchers in conjunction with farmers, veterinary surgeons and other health and welfare advisors (Bell & Huxley 2009). The aim was to create a simple, standardised, scoring system, which dairy farmers could use themselves, on their farms, to assess the mobility of their cows. Farmers are encouraged to make at least monthly observations of all cows in the herd walking on a hard, non-slip surface. Further to this, in 2011, DairyCo launched the Healthy Feet Programme, an industry-wide initiative to reduce lameness in Great Britain (DairyCo 2013).

Despite the launch of these initiatives and an overall increased understanding of lameness risk factors, assessment, prevention and treatment, it continues to be a welfare concern on many dairy farms. This paper argues that further progress in reducing lameness may be made through gaining a greater understanding of farmers’ personal experiences of lameness detection and treatment as it occurs on their farm.