

FOR SUCCESS, GO INTO SELECTIVE DRY COW THERAPY WITH EYES OPEN

Two months ago in these pages, 'Dry cow therapy under scrutiny' outlined in detail one milk processor's leadership towards evidence-led reductions in antibiotic use. Clearly, those holding supply contracts with that processor had a vested interest in reading the full story, perhaps more than once.

For suppliers to other milk buyers, some of whom may be excused for thinking 'this doesn't affect us' and perhaps didn't therefore read the whole article, here's how it concluded: "There is no doubt that selective dry cow therapy will become the norm in the future and while Arla may be the first processor to insist on it, other dairy companies are likely to follow suit."

Among many good points in that article, one stands out above the rest and bears repeating for everyone's benefit, regardless of milk buyer. That's according to vet Dave Armstrong from Zoetis, the company behind the original teat sealant that has been on the UK scene since the 2002 Dairy Event, OrbeSeal®. "Don't be misled into thinking that selective dry cow therapy is easy," he says. "Because it isn't."

A good place to start, he suggests, is defining what is meant by selective dry cow therapy and, before doing anything else, having a chat with the farm's regular vet about what is involved. The definition Dave Armstrong suggests is: "At drying off, it requires a cow-by-cow decision about whether each one in turn requires antibiotic dry cow therapy (ADCT) in addition to all cows receiving an internal teat sealant such as OrbeSeal®.

"This is based on our knowledge, supported by evidence from numerous scientific studies and on-farm success, that all cows benefit from dry period protection by OrbeSeal, but not all cows may need an antibiotic during the dry period.

"For cows that do require antibiotic dry cow tubes, a decision is needed to select the most appropriate product for the cow's requirements and likely bacterial types to achieve high treatment success and thereby reduce the probability of having to use more antibiotic during the next lactation."

Three essential requirements specified by Dave Armstrong before embarking on selective dry cow therapy are accurate records, vet's involvement and operator training. Three types of record are essential: Herd bulk cell counts, a list of cows treated for clinical mastitis during the lactation just ending, and individual cow cell counts for at least the three months up to drying off but ideally for the whole lactation.

"Step one for farmer and vet together is to decide whether the herd cell count and incidence of clinical mastitis are at levels that make selective therapy a feasible option," advises Mr Armstrong.

"If the answer is not yet, the focus initially should clearly be on reducing herd cell counts and clinical mastitis incidence, rather than SDCT. Clearly, on farms whose milk buyer is phasing in selective therapy this is a matter of some urgency.

"If herd records support the adoption of SDCT, then farmer and vet need to go through individual cow records one-by-one and allocate each individual to one of several possible drying off protocols."

This is also where operator training comes into play, explains the Zoetis vet. The administration of teat sealant must be scrupulously clean, whether antibiotic is also being given or not. "On farms where OrbeSeal has been used successfully for the past 12 years, skilled and conscientious application is consistently present," he emphasises.

"For cows that require antibiotic dry cow treatment as well as teat sealant, Dave Armstrong says identifying which mastitis bacteria are involved on that farm enables evidence-based selection of the optimum dry cow tube with the highest probability of treatment success.

To help vets take farmers through this somewhat complex process, Zoetis has created detailed guidelines and a leaflet for farmers. Featured in the leaflet is James Lee from Winnington Green Farm near Welshpool, who offer his perspective with a spring calving grazing herd of 420 Jersey-crosses.

"We started selective dry cow therapy in 2012," he says. "Now, 60 to 70% of our cows are treated with OrbeSeal alone. With our vet, we've set the level where cows get teat sealant only at no more than 150,000 SCC and no clinical mastitis cases during this lactation.

"In just two years following our adoption of OrbeSeal, clinical mastitis was down by two-thirds and cell counts halved, and of course there's also been a substantial saving on dry cow tubes. To achieve this level of success, the most important thing is to follow a strict hygiene routine.

"We see drying off as a completely separate job, never done during or just after milking. When in doubt it's best to err on the side of caution – if you're not sure whether a cow should have teat seal alone, or teat seal and antibiotic, give both!

At Winnington Green Farm, the vet is Geoff Lloyd from Camlas Farm Vets on the Wales-Shropshire border. He has introduced SDCT with proactive clients like the Lee family over the past couple of years. For success, he insists that farmers take individual cow factors into account at drying off, for example teat end damage or an unusually dirty cow.

"Above all else, strict hygiene during the drying off procedure is vital," he says. "A selective therapy programme should result in using less antibiotic. Farms with predominantly gram negative pathogens - coliforms, for example - may see a reduction in clinical mastitis rates. Personally, I think there is also an intangible benefit through much more attention paid to the drying off process, hygiene especially.

"Key to making the right decisions are good records: individual cow SCC throughout lactation, accurate clinical mastitis records and mastitis pathogen profile on the farm. It is also important to discuss SDCT with all the farm staff and agree a written protocol, which suits this individual farm and that staff will be committed to implementing exactly."