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Lameness is apparently a constant and enduring reality in the dairy industry. Most research indicates that the annual incidence of lameness averages between 25% and 30% in herd across the nation. But when considered in the context of what would be a “natural or normal” situation concerning lameness in cattle that would seem like a huge increase. When we look at wild cattle or even pastured cattle, the numbers are much lower. So it would seem that this endemic lameness is not a normal condition for cattle. It is an aberration or a situation that is imposed on these animals through human management. If it’s not normal, then what can be done to limit the impact and extent of lameness?

As with any management scheme, some sort of structure is needed to define goals and keep you moving toward those goals. Because a great deal of the national news coverage these days is concerned with military operations and activities let us look at lameness control or management in a military-like framework. Our object would then to defeat our “enemy”(reduce lameness to a minimum). What would our plan be? We would identify the potential causes of lameness on a farm (the enemy), identify the management or facilities issues related to those causes (develop a plan of attack) and fix or change those problems which were the root cause of our lameness (implement the plan). Note that we assume that lameness is generally caused by problems related to human control. Humans exert control over every aspect of the cattle’s environment and diet; consequently, it is in

our power to change that situation in ways that minimize the causative agents of the lameness.

The first part of our plan is identifying the “enemy”. In this case we need to look no farther than the hoof trimmer and the vet. Whenever these individuals treat or locate a particular problem on a hoof (stone bruise, abscess, false sole, etc.), the cow/hoof/claw should be identified and recorded. After a short time this recorded information will begin to show trends relating to type of hoof injury or treatment. From that we can begin to identify the main possible causes of the lameness in the herd. Obviously, there will always be some small number of animals that will be exceptions to the rule, but in most herds the majority of lameness results from specific causes like these. So now we have a way to identify our “enemy”. Once it is identified, a plan for management or facilities changes can be developed.

The causes for lameness can really be broken down to three or four issues. The most common are: injury, stone bruises, for example. Then comes nutritionally related problems, such as laminitis and finally hoof problem relating to viral or bacterial infection, like heel warts. There are some others but these are some of the biggest causes. Each of these has obvious relationships with management or facilities. Once the monitoring process points to particular types of hoof problems, the hunt begins.

The hunt is for the specific cause of this lameness. Often, injury type lameness results from some poorly designed or maintained facilities. Broken freestalls, stones in sand

bedding; uneven flooring all could result in injuries. Problems related to bacterial or viral problems need different solutions. Now that monitoring has pointed to significant management issues relating to microbes a consultation with the veterinarian may be in order. If the main recurrent lameness complaint is laminitis, or dried blood appearing in the hoof tissue then nutritional practices will be the first thing to consider. Laminitis primarily related to the management of feeding programs. Allowing slug-feeding or consumption of a mis-mixed TMR batch can lower blood pH and cause sub clinical acidosis. Several bouts of this type of acidosis can lead to irreversible damage. There are a number of other possible reasons and causes of lameness. But until monitoring is used to pinpoint the trends there is little to be gained from a shotgun approach to treatment.

Lastly, consider the economics. In a British study of 340 herds, the difference between the best herds (6% lameness) and the worst herds (50% lameness), the annual loss on a per 100 cow basis was \$13,350. That shows that there is a lot of money on the table to be gained. The only question that remains is, why not take the money?