DAIRY HERD HEALTH & PRODUCTIVITY SERVICE

Newsletter 2025, Q1 Feb 2025

Finnian (Finn) Logan – new DHHPS vet

Hello, I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce myself as a new staff member in the DHHPS team. It is a service that I believe can contribute a lot to the herd health management of any dairy, suckler or sheep enterprise and I hope to be able to contribute and help out as best I can.

I am from County Kildare in Ireland, and graduated as a vet from UCD, Dublin in 2017. During my time at Vet School, I was lucky to spend some time with a dairy vet practice in Wisconsin. Since graduating, I have been working in mixed practice in Northern Ireland, France and in the Republic of Ireland.

I have spent the last four years undertaking the European College of Bovine Health Management residency in UCD, Dublin where I learned a huge amount from a very experienced team and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

During my Residency, my research project focused on the use of mobility scoring to detect foot lesions in dairy cows, particularly within the context of the pastured-based dairy cow systems that we see in the Republic of Ireland. We mobility scored 600 cows from 12 Irish dairy herds, and then picked up their feet to see what lesions (if any) were present.

Similar to other studies in pasture-based systems in Ireland and New Zealand, 12% of the cows were mobility score 2 or 3 (ie. lame), which is lower than equivalent studies in the UK. Around half of the cows had an identifiable foot lesion, of which the most common was White Line Disease. In contrast, cases of digital dermatitis were relatively uncommon.

Overall, my research showed that the ability of mobility scoring to pick up cows with foot lesions was relatively low, unless the lesions were severe. This means that it is likely that cows with foot lesions will be missed when mobility scoring in dairy herds, possibly a reflection of cows' ability to mask the signs of painful lesions.

In contrast, I found that cows without lesions rarely had an elevated mobility score, and those cows with a mobility score of 2 or 3 most often have foot lesions.

This work does **not** mean that mobility scoring is not worthwhile! It remains a valuable screening tool to pick up cows with painful foot lesions, and ensure the early detection and prompt effective treatment of lameness cases. Increasing the frequency of mobility scoring, and combining mobility scoring with routine foot trimming data can be used to overcome any limitations.

Prior to my Residency, most of my work would have been in the area of individual animal medicine and surgery in both dairy and suckler beef enterprises. However, throughout the last four years, I have acquired a keen interest in all matters herd health and so I am very happy to have joined the DHHPS team and look forward to using what I have learned and continuing to learn and develop in this area.

Outside of work, I have a love of all sport, in particular rugby and Gaelic football. I enjoy all manner of outdoor pursuits such as cycling, hillwalking and swimming.

I am really looking forward to working with my colleagues in the DHHPS and in the Farm Animal Practice, and I hope that I can be of assistance to you as part of the service provide by the DHHPS.

Ensuring an easy calving season

With spring calving for both suckler and block calving dairy herds shortly upon us, it is worth thinking about the things that can be done now to ensure an easy calving season. Of course decisions that were made months ago about which heifers/cows to breed and which bulls to use will have a significant impact on how calving progresses. That said, there are still plenty of other variables that should be considered over the coming weeks.

For most herds, it is probably too late to do much about any obese pregnant cows at increased risk of calving difficulties. Controlled loss of body condition in early to mid-pregnancy should be considered for cows over body condition score (BCS) 3.5 (scale 1-5), but no attempt should be made to reduce body condition in the last month of pregnancy. The good news is that in a study we conducted across 84 spring calving suckler herds, fewer than 7% of cows fell into the over conditioned category (Bragg et al, Vet Record, 2021), indicating that the vast majority of suckler cows are not at risk of calving difficulties due to excess body condition.

What did surprise us in this study was the increased risk of calving difficulties for thin cows i.e. those under BCS 2.5. In fact, these animals were almost twice as likely to require calving assistance as those in ideal body condition. This may sound counter-intuitive, but highlights that thin cows are likely thin for a reason – they may be sick or they may be on a diet that is failing to meet their nutritional requirements. As such, there is still time for most spring calving herds to body condition score their cattle, and ensure that any thin cows are examined to determine whether they are suffering from an underlying disease problem (particularly lameness!) and provided with additional feeding.

There are a host of other management and metabolic factors that may influence how things progress in the run up to calving. Group changes for example in late pregnancy are known to increase stillbirth rates, and so ensuring that any body condition scoring and group sorting is

completed well before calving is due to start is important. The magnesium and calcium status of both suckler and dairy cows is also of paramount importance, with 25-30 grams of magnesium per head per day recommended for most rations in the last month of pregnancy to reduce the risk of slow calving syndrome, leading to weak and stillborn calves. Selenium and iodine deficiency are also important causes of weak and stillborn calves!

Calves that are born with any assistance or that have a weak suck reflex 15 minutes after birth should always be supplemented with additional colostrum. 10% of bodyweight immediately after birth of high quality colostrum (over 22% when tested using a Brix refractometer) is considered to be the industry standard. Whilst nutritional studies looking at the relationship of dietary protein and colostrum quantity and quality are inconsistent, ensuring that cows have sufficient Effective Rumen Degradable Protein in the ration should help to support colostrum production.

With so many nutritional factors impacting on calving ease, calf viability and colostrum production, it is always worth ensuring that the cows are able to meet their current metabolic requirements from the ration on offer. Reviewing forage analysis and ration composition is a good start, with the option of taking blood samples from cows in the last three weeks of pregnancy to assess energy, protein and mineral balance. For eligible herds, the costs of testing may be supported via the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway in England.