

CellCheck Farmer Workshops-facilitating active learning

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Introduction:

The objective of the CellCheck programme is to sustainably reduce the somatic cell count (SCC) of the national dairy herd. Previous studies have shown that a lack of technical knowledge is not a constraint to improving udder health; however adoption and implementation of this knowledge continues to be a challenge. A disparity has also been identified between self-reported 'best practices' in the milking process and the standard to which those same practices are performed. While farmers may be aware of recommendations to control mastitis, the implementation of these practices to a good standard is often poor.

Objectives:

The objectives of the CellCheck Farmer Workshops were:

1. To improve farmer's adoption and standard of key best practices around mastitis control
2. To strengthen service provider networks, and facilitate engagement with farmers on mastitis control and milk quality.

Materials and methods:

Workshops were coordinated nationally by 7 CellCheck Regional Coordinators, who were all processor employees, for established farm discussion groups, or for ad hoc groups of farmers invited to participate by their co-op. The fee for participation was €30 per farmer, which on agreement with the various milk processors and with the suppliers' permission, was deducted from the supplier's milk cheque on behalf of AHI. The Regional Coordinators used the national database of >350 "CellCheck Stage 2" trained service providers to put together a 4-person multidisciplinary delivery team for each workshop, comprising a co-op milk quality advisor, a group facilitator, a milking machine technician and a vet. Team members invoiced AHI for their delivery time where necessary, up to a maximum of €150 per workshop.

Workshop structure:

- farm-based
- 2.5 hours duration
- mixture of classroom-style learning, group discussion and participation, practical interactive workstations, and target setting
- standardised materials used (powerpoint slides, group exercises and worksheets)
- "CellCheck Farm Guidelines for Mastitis Control" as a reference manual
- Key technical messages:
 - Post-milking teat disinfection
 - Wearing gloves for milking
 - Changing milking machine liners at 2,000 milkings
 - Routine machine maintenance
 - Value of milk recording

Results:

104 workshops were run in 2013, with 1,470 participating farmers and an average group size of 14. Initial evaluation of participant feedback forms showed that 75% of farmers gave a satisfaction rating of 6 or 7 (with 7 being the most satisfied).

Results (cont.)

The farmers identified the following as the things they enjoyed the most about the workshop:

- Science based, non-commercial information presented
- Practical work stations
- Peer learning/Group discussion
- Mixed expertise available

Farmers reported that workshop participation created an increased awareness of the benefits of better udder health, and would result in more focus on mastitis control in their herds. Participants most commonly planned to make changes in the following areas:

- Post milking teat disinfection
- Wearing gloves at milking
- Milk recording

Observation of workshops by AHI staff showed that they were consistently delivered by the 4-person multidisciplinary teams, using the standardised materials developed. However in some cases service providers attempted to shorten the duration of the workshop, consequently eliminating the opportunities for group discussion and farmer participation.



Discussion:

In general, participation in a CellCheck Farmer Workshop was a positive experience for both farmers and service providers. It increased farmers' awareness and focus on udder health, highlighted the economic opportunities from improving udder health and helped to identify simple changes in their current milking routines that could reduce the risk of mastitis. However, further work such as analysis of bulk tank SCC data is required to identify an associated change in udder health performance.

Service providers also enjoyed the experience of delivering training as part of a multi-disciplinary team, and the opportunity to meet and work with other professionals. However one of the challenges identified was that many service providers were outside their "comfort zone" in creating an interactive environment for farmers, and thus often adopted a "lecturing" role instead. Some service providers were also unsure about the appropriate time distribution between the various workshop sections. These findings resulted in the refinement of the Stage 2 training and workshop materials midway through 2013.

Workshops were an effective way to ensure that farmers received common and consistent messages around mastitis control, and this workshop structure could potentially be used for other priority disease areas. The CellCheck Farmer Workshops will continue in 2014, as will quality control to ensure that workshop objectives are being met, and for ongoing programme evaluation.