Sally Wilson is a DairyCo trained mobility mentor who helps dairy farmers tackle welfare issues and promote a positive and professional image by being ‘proud of dairy’. She finds the work tremendously satisfying.

AS a student, doing my stint with a traditional equine vet, I grew accustomed to hearing his favourite saying: ‘no foot, no horse’. This old adage is, of course, well-founded common sense and can equally be extended to other species. The very first time I set foot on my first dairy farm when seeing farm practice, I knew that I wanted to be a dairy vet. Fresh-faced and naive, with absolutely no farming background or experience, I thought I could change the world if I set my mind to it. I was therefore amazed at how accepted lameness was. Lame cows were simply part of the furniture and raised no comment at all.

Looking back, it was even more worrying when, as a young, recently qualified vet, spending day after exhausting day on an exponential learning curve, scanning, calving, dehorning, castrating, I suddenly realised that I wasn’t noticing lame cows either. After an amazingly short period of time, I had become desensitised and, already, was automatically ignoring the signs. Nowadays, with a lot more experience of dealing comfortably with farmers, I have the confidence to allow myself to feel some compassion for cows that are struggling, and can tell a farmer when I think that a foot needs picking up, or that a cow should be euthanased. I no longer worry that he may think I’m soft but, as a new vet, this wasn’t so easy.

As my career developed, I became interested in dairy cow fertility and I admit that lameness didn’t really float my boat. When I attended training for the DairyCo Healthy Feet Programme, it was not an interest in the subject matter that attracted me I attended the course for two reasons:

- Lameness is a major example of failure in dairy cow welfare – and ‘welfare’ is a prominent red-flag issue;
- As the proprietor of a fairly young farm practice, I wanted to make sure that we held our own with availability of services for our clients. I also quite fancied having the title ‘mobility mentor’.

My attitude, however, had changed completely by the end of the training. In fact, I came away quite a foot enthusiast.

The thing about feet is that it is actually fairly easy to quite speedily produce good results. The stumbling block is getting farmers to recognise that they have a problem in the first place – and this is where the programme helps, by getting the farmer to see his cows as they are: lame.

I have now run the DairyCo Healthy Feet Programme on a number of my farms. It can be difficult, initially, to persuade farmers to accept that there is room for improvement but, once you get that across, you’re on your way. My advice would be not to overlook the herdsman, as he can be key. Generate some enthusiasm in him, get him to take responsibility for improving his cows’ feet, make it his project and you are more than 50 per cent there.

Another skill I learned from the training (and one in which I admittedly still need
practice) is the ability to enable the farmer to identify the problem himself – and then to lead him (unobtrusively) to his own conclusion. A farmer who decides on a plan of action on his own is more likely to instigate that plan than if the vet decides for him. When you achieve this, the feeling of satisfaction is immense – until, of course, it becomes obvious that the farmer gives you absolutely no credit, and is convinced that he could have got there without you! This could suggest that you are doing your job too well.

My favourite day is the ‘identifying lesions day’ because, although initially treated with cautious suspicion, it is eventually the day the farmer enjoys the most. He is asked to sort out a number of cows for trimming and some lame cows for examination, and then to carry out whatever action/treatment he thinks is necessary while the mobility mentor looks on and advises. I never cease to be amazed at the amount of improvement achieved during this one day and, as a result, have carried the practice into my normal routine visits. Now, whenever I am presented with a lame cow, I suggest that the farmer himself picks up the foot while I merely offer advice on treatment. This works really well as it is building his skills for the future.

**Success**

Healthy Feet has helped me to score a big success on one of my farms where, although the farmer was determined to do all the feet in his 300-cow herd, the herdsman was just as determinedly disinterested. Lame cows would be written up on the board by the owner, only to be rubbed off, unexamined, by the herdsman. Since I ran the Healthy Feet programme on the farm, that same herdsman now locomotion-scores the entire herd once a month. He sends us the results, and we plot them on a graph and produce a short report on the progress achieved. Furthermore, his lifetime aim is now to reduce the lameness prevalence to zero – and he’s getting there.

The course also produced a welcome spin-off for the farmer who had, for some time, been showing a marked lack of enthusiasm for his farm. On the last day of the Healthy Feet visit, enthusiasm was returning sufficiently to enable us to chat about the farm’s potential and – result – he told me last week that he is planning a new parlour, slurry pit and shed. While this turnaround obviously cannot be attributed solely to the Healthy Feet programme, I firmly believe that improving the lameness, while simultaneously injecting some enthusiasm into his herdsman, helped him to reach his decision to continue to develop his farming business – and that is definitely mobility mentor job satisfaction.

**Ten-minute chat**

Roy Batt is a retired vet, teacher, researcher and lecturer in animal anatomy. He is also a poet, and is currently collecting poems written by members of the veterinary profession.

**How did your initial interest in poetry come about?**

I feel that I first came to poetry as a small child by listening to it; this was before I could read or write. It was the rhythm I enjoyed. Later I enjoyed hearing it read at school and, by age 12, I had a poem published in the school magazine.

**How did you get to where you are today?**

I graduated in veterinary science after five years of study, which I found very difficult at first, but I steadily gained in confidence and graduated in 1958. I had become particularly interested in anatomy and, after a spell in mixed practice (in Reading, Berkshire) I returned to Liverpool to complete a BSc degree within the human anatomy department. This included a research project, which I continued to work on both in my post as a lecturer, as a full-time researcher and, often, collaboratively. My last paper was published after my retirement in 1989. Over this period of more than 30 years, I and my collaborators showed that an inherited syndrome in mice, including obesity, sterility and deficient bone/muscle growth, was, in all likelihood, due to failed regulation by the hypothalamus of the brain. This was proved soon after, by the animal’s (and child’s) response to the newly discovered hormone, leptin, which matures the hypothalamus.

**How did writing poetry sit alongside veterinary work?**

I wrote little as a university student and beyond. It was as a lecturer in my early 40s that I had another poem published. From then on I wrote steadily, joined poetry groups and went to workshops. I still attend and I write at least a few lines every day. Writing poetry can go on during a working life. There is enough time and energy – and desire. I never seemed to write about animals so perhaps poetry was a release from work. I have written about dogs, very recently.

**Do you enjoy performing your work?**

I like reading to an audience. Lecturing has given me this experience, as did acting, of which I used to do a fair amount. I have launched some of my poetry books to audiences. I always feel somewhat nervous before starting, though nothing of the terror of waiting to go on stage before the start of a play!

**Tell us about your latest project.**

I am collecting poems and editing the next anthology of poems from the veterinary profession, with the aim of publishing a book. It is daunting, but I hope to get there.

**What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**

A good piece of advice I was given was ‘Poetry is music’; the point being, I think, that they must both flow.

**What advice would you give to someone considering following a similar interest?**

I would pass that advice on to a beginner. Poetry and music are both in our nature; we have to let them out and give them their freedom.

**What was your most embarrassing moment?**

I have had embarrassing moments I’m sure, but I seem to have buried them!
Ten-minute chat

Roy Batt

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