

Animal health: Discover potential health benefits of using homeopathy

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The homeopathic treatment of livestock diseases is relatively uncommon, but the practice has been around for 200 years and devotees are convinced it works.

Vet Chris Day explores homeopathic treatment as a potential alternative to conventional medicine, while dairy farmer Tim Downes explains how he uses a simple treatment to replace conventional dry cow therapy.

Mr Day, a qualified veterinarian, has been practising homeopathic medicine for 40 years. Its approach is holistic, so the first step is to ensure livestock are being correctly managed, he stresses, as healthy livestock will cope better with disease challenge.

“In an intensive farm situation, however, ideal conditions are not always attainable,” says Mr Day, who runs the Alternative Veterinary Centre in Stanford-in-the-Vale, Oxfordshire.

“But persistent homeopathic treatments can reduce health problems to a manageable level. One major advantage is antibiotic and wormer resistance issues do not apply to homeopathy.”

He stresses livestock diseases are usually acute by nature and are therefore fairly straightforward to treat. Homeopathic medicines are chosen on the basis of the body’s reaction to the remedies and a wide spectrum of diseases can be treated.

Most of his farm cases come at the specific request of the producer. Following an enquiry, he will contact the farm vet for permission to become involved in the case and this is always granted. However some farmers have taken the principles on board and opt to prescribe their own treatments, he says.

Mr Day says: “For anyone new to homeopathy, it will resemble nothing they have ever seen before. But farmers can learn how to diagnose and administer treatments to their own livestock once they have grasped the basics.

“Remedies are widely available and can be given via a nasal or facial spray, sprayed into the vulva, placed in the mouth and even injected in the conventional way. Whole herd or flock treatments may be added to the water trough. There is no set time-scale; treatments can be carried out daily, weekly or monthly. In cases of virulent disease, a remedy might be given every few minutes.”

Mr Day has overseen the treatment of many dairy herds where homeopathy is used routinely.

“Homeopathy has almost fully replaced the need for any conventional drug or hormone treatments on some units. Persistent individual cases can still be treated using antibiotics. But once the obstacles to recovery are removed, there is no reason why homeopathic treatments cannot achieve the same – or even greater – levels of success than antibiotics.

“Since there is no withdrawal period for meat and milk from animals treated homeopathically, production levels are increased. This is especially relevant on organic farms, where withdrawal periods are longer than on conventional units.”

It is always difficult to compare costs across different types of treatment, but in general, successful cases are highly cost-effective, Mr Day says.

“Fees are usually time-based and, while first consultations can be lengthy, overall costs tend to be minimal compared with conventional treatments. Medicines themselves are very cheap to buy, mainly because they are so highly diluted. One remedy involves adding just a teaspoon of medicine to a 200-gallon water trough and this is enough for 200 cows.”

Homeopathy can be used alongside conventional drug treatments, but this approach is rare and requires careful planning, he warns.

“Some standard medicines can counteract the benefits of homeopathy, with steroids in particular masking the response to treatments and giving a false picture. But it can work well in conjunction with antibiotics, for example. However this would normally fall outside the scope of most farmers and requires the services of an experienced homeopathic vet.”

Homeopathy was first introduced in the early 19th century and many cultures around the world still have great faith in its effect, Mr Day says.

“There was a strong resurgence of interest in the practice in the early 1990s, but in recent years, the principles have been questioned and there has been a strong anti-homeopathy movement. But despite the recent negativity, there is still considerable global demand.

“It is all too easy to be sceptical about the practice and it should be remembered standard treatments rarely bring a 100 per cent success rate. I feel it is hugely under exploited.

“Whenever I am questioned about its use, I always give the same reply: I am a qualified vet and I consider I am reasonably intelligent. If I did not fully believe it works, why would I continue to use it to treat animal diseases for four decades?”

Case study - Tim Downes, Longnor, Shropshire



TIM Downes runs a herd of 250 New Zealand Friesians on a low input system. A committed organic farmer, he first tried homeopathic remedies 20 years ago and has been using them ever since.

“I sought some advice from Chris Day about how to treat ringworm and with that success behind me, I began using homeopathy on a regular basis,” says Mr Downes.

“I attended a three-day training course with my herdsman and we read up on the subject.

“It may seem complex to start with, but once the basic principles have been understood, it is relatively straight forward. Unlike standard veterinary medicine, homeopathic principles have remained unchanged. The main aim with farm livestock is to practice good husbandry and then use the treatments to stimulate the animal’s own immune response and encourage the body to heal itself.”

As an organic producer, Mr Downes has restricted access to antibiotic dry cow therapy and homeopathic treatments have allowed him to cut out their use altogether.

“Decisions on treatment are made following close observation of the affected cow and the symptoms she is exhibiting. In cases of suspected mastitis, for example, I will note details about the appearance and feel of the udder. If clots are present, I will assess their colour and consistency, as this will indicate which treatment will be effective.

“In one particular case, a cow with mastitis had a very swollen and painful quarter. She was nervous and fidgety and lashed out when she was approached. I treated her with belladonna, but without much hope and thinking she might lose the quarter. By the evening, the swelling had gone down considerably, there were only a few clots and she was calm and placid.

“A combination of the homeopathic remedies, sulphur, silica and carbo vegetabilis, was applied, to treat the remaining clots. Just one week later, this cow produced a scored 16 on the somatic cell count in the monthly milk recording. Not all cases have been as dramatic as this, of course, and we have culled repeatedly infected cows.”

As lactating cows are not given antibiotics, there has been no need to withhold milk from the tank, he adds. There are no intrusive injections or a requirement to dispose of needles. Another bonus is homeopathic medicine is cheap, compared with veterinary drugs; one of the nasal spray treatments costs only £12 for 100 doses.

“I regularly use aconite for stressful situations, such as de-horning and castration,” he says. “Arnica works well for bruising and difficult calvings and cows with fertility problems are given sepia, to get them back in calf. Cases of milk fever and staggers are dealt with using conventional calcium and magnesium injections, alongside homeopathy.

“On the whole, I would say in terms of mastitis treatment, homeopathic remedies have produced better results, compared with standard veterinary medicine. There have been instances when the initial treatment failed, but a change in remedy has generally had a positive effect.”

Homeopathy

THE word homeopathy comes from Ancient Greek and means ‘similar to the disease’. The practice uses curative agents with the ability to provoke a similar set of symptoms in a healthy body.

Extreme dilutions are used to produce the medicines, which means they are very safe. They work through the body’s energy processes rather like computer software, as opposed to working pharmacologically.

There are no known dangers associated with the use of homeopathy. It can be used on pregnant, unborn and juvenile animals.

There are no known side effects. The medicines act as a stimulus to the body's own healing processes, rather than attempting to make alterations more directly, as occurs with drugs, herbs and aromatherapy.

Side effects result from the body's reaction to drug medicine, whereas the body's reaction to homeopathic medicines is a healing response.

On occasions, there may be a temporary worsening of some of the signs of the illness being treated. This only occurs when the correct medicine has been selected, but potency levels have been miscalculated.

Stopping the medication usually brings rapid improvement. This phenomenon is known as 'therapeutic aggravation.' It is a result of the body's method of healing, rather than any effect of the homeopathic medicine.

Human patients often report they feel better, despite a slight increase in the outward signs of the illness.