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£2889 while the worst 25% lose £12,500 (data from 52 herds over 11 years).

■ The cost of a severe case of clinical mastitis is £468.

■ The average cost of lameness is £193.

And so it goes on – culminating in the average herd losing £17,000 per 100 cows from poor fertility and disease, worth the equivalent of 2.8ppl on average 6000 litre yields. And this is wasted profit "compared to achievable targets, not compared to perfection", say the authors.

The potential for reducing these losses is considerable, but knowing where to start isn't easy, largely because it is difficult to weigh up veterinary savings because you just can't see where losses are leaking out of the system.

What is clearly visible, though, is how much you ultimately spend on AI, vets fees and drugs at the end of the year. There they are, bold as brass, in the accounts. At least they can be compared on a year-on-year basis to give a measure of improvement or otherwise.

Those figures, though, only provide a historic guide and do nothing to help make an assessment of whether a treatment or preventative programme will be financially worthwhile. What is ideally needed is a way of predicting disease savings in advance of action being taken. As with any major business decision, the benefits of taking action need to be carefully weighed up against the cost. What is the status quo costing me? What will it cost to rectify it? What will the payback be? Is it worth it?

Up until now if you asked your vet precisely how much a preventative course of action could save you he'll probably have some idea, but would not know with any degree of accuracy. From now on, though, he stands a much better chance. That's because the British Cattle Veterinary Association is due to launch shortly a new and comprehensive disease cost calculator, attached to the organisation's existing Herd Health Plan software.

This will tell a producer, as precisely as the inputted figures allow, what the cost of a particular disease is on his farm,

using his own data rather than averages. Actual costs for AI, mastitis, calving interval lapses, lameness and culling can all be assessed individually.

Then it is relatively straightforward to work out the cost of a particular preventative strategy, to analyse treatment costs and to assess the benefits. Suddenly the assessment of potential health gains has changed from being an art, based on a rather subjective assessment of average figures, to more of a precise science that will accurately analyse a cost:benefit return.

"Health planning has come of age," says the module's developer Pete Orpin, a large animal vet from Leicester who, with Devon vet Dick Sibley and others, has championed the herd health-planning cause.

He has recently tested the prototype program on 20 of his practice's dairy units, representing 3000 cows in a trial conducted in conjunction with fellow BCVA vets. Ultimately they determined a cost for the herds who didn't achieve the targets.

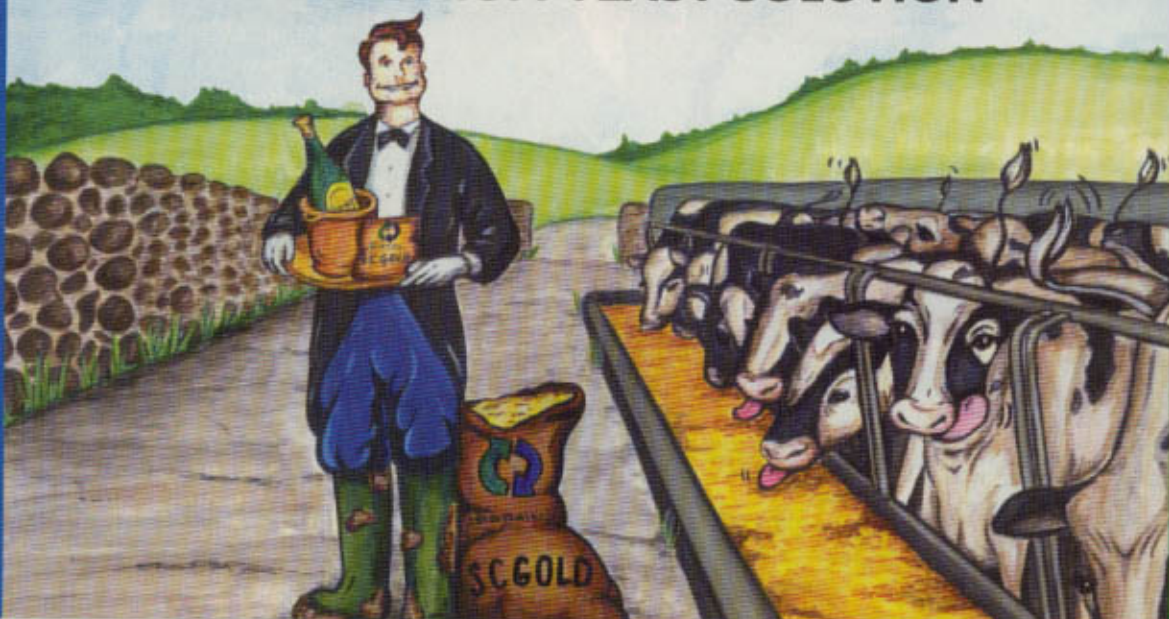
For fertility the targets were a 365-day calving index, 6%



Peter Orpin: vets now have the means to give a cost:benefit analysis to back any proposal before embarking on a course of treatment.

'failure to conceive' culling and a 50% pregnancy rate. The mastitis target was 30 cases of clinical mastitis per 100 cows, with no cows forcibly culled because of high cell counts or mastitis. These were reasonable targets, they say, because many

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