



Mindset change key to improving mobility

Changing how the task of mobility scoring is viewed by producers will open up opportunities to improve foot health and reduce lameness issues, and automation adds ease and accuracy.

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Mobility scoring was introduced as a way to measure and interpret lameness incidence in dairy herds around 15 years ago, with cows assessed against a standard scale ranging from 0, representing good, to 3 (severely impaired mobility). “While developed as a practical way to assess and allow comparison between herds, mobility scoring is seen by some producers as a ‘box ticking’ requirement for milk processor assurance schemes,” says HerdVision’s vet Georgia Thresh.

“This means that dairy businesses are missing out on the significant benefits the approach can offer when

it comes to earlier identification of cows with mobility problems and prompter intervention to reduce the severity of these issues.”

This view was confirmed in the recent Stride National Dairy Mobility Survey, which demonstrated that a change in attitude towards mobility scoring is required to ‘unlock’ potential improvements in levels of compromised mobility.

Mobility scoring

The Stride survey revealed that while 20% of respondents were mobility scoring cows monthly or more frequently, 23% were not mobility scoring at all and 9% only mobility scored annually. The balance of herds are scoring cows quarterly.

“These results show that the vast majority of herds are not scoring cows frequently enough to pinpoint issues efficiently, meaning cows will often only get ‘flagged’ when the degree of severity has increased. And this means it will be more costly to treat and any resulting production losses will be greater. ▶

Georgia Thresh:
“More frequent mobility scoring offers myriad benefits”



◀ “Some respondents who said they were mobility scoring regularly added that they did it when moving cows to the parlour for milking, which can make it hard to be consistent and produces variable results,” Ms Thresh adds. The survey also asked who was mobility scoring cows. On 45% of units completing the survey, scoring was exclusively carried out by an external scorer – a vet, foot trimmer or a RoMS-accredited scorer – compared to 30% of herds who used just on-farm labour. A combined team approach, using both farm staff and external resource, was used on 17% of units.

Time consuming

“These figures help highlight some of the issues with mobility scoring,” continues Ms Thresh. “Firstly, it is time consuming to score cows and to then analyse the results to identify problem cows and trends. It can also mean disrupting the cows’ normal routine, with scoring cows in robot-milked herds particularly challenging. “There are always significant time pressures on dairy staff and, if something is time consuming and not deemed business critical, it may be tempting to do it less often, particularly if using an external scorer that comes with an additional cost. And if cows are only being scored to placate the milk buyer, why score more often than necessary?,” she says.

“Secondly, the more different people there are scoring the herd the greater the risk of variable results. Despite clear guidelines, it is not uncommon for people to score cows differently and this will impact the value of the results.”

Ms Thresh says that producers will see significant improvements in foot health and mobility if they are challenged to change the way they think about mobility scoring. “Because evidence points to the importance of

early identification of foot health problems followed by rapid intervention to tackle issues.

“The sooner a problem is identified, the more quickly and cost-effectively it can be addressed. And we know that around 80% of foot health problems are chronic or recurrent cases. Chronically lame cows often end up being culled.

“Comprehensive prevention protocols will help avoid mobility issues becoming chronic, and preventing the progression to chronic disease begins with early identification,” she stresses.

“Approaching mobility scoring as the foundation to improving foot health in the herd, instead of as something that has to be done but is a bit of an inconvenience, could help reduce the stubbornly high levels of sub-optimal mobility seen in herds across the country.”

To be effective, she says cows should be mobility scored at least weekly to allow changes in mobility to be picked up quickly, allowing hooves to be inspected by farm staff and treated as required. If an external foot trimmer is used, then mobility score just before a regular visit so that all problem cows are seen.

As well as looking at results in isolation, more regular scoring means it is possible to identify trends that may allow action to be taken to tackle the root cause of problems.

Consistent measurement

“Scoring can highlight a problem with a particular building, such as cubicle size or number. Alternatively, a spike in mobility issues in early lactation may suggest problems during transition. Infrequent scoring does not allow this degree of analysis, meaning problems can persist,” says Ms Thresh.

Mobility scoring lends itself to automation because it relies on frequent and consistent measurement and reporting. Camera technologies, such as HerdVision, provide a simple and consistent way of assessing mobility of cows every day, and this develops an accurate and dynamic picture across the herd.” The system identifies and analyses key points and anatomical attributes indicative of lameness, and 3D images are then utilised to calculate individual cow’s scores. These are transmitted to a cloud-based server for further reporting.

Accessible through a user-friendly PC dashboard, and the new Herdtasker app, the results provide actionable insights for producers, leading to a better prognosis and improved welfare.

Early-warning alerts mean potential problems can be spotted sooner, helping to reduce the severity of the problem. In addition to individual cow data, the system allows straightforward analysis of trends. The data can also be shared with others involved in managing cow health, such as the vet, foot trimmer and nutritionist. “Data are collected more frequently and consistently, with no labour requirement,” adds Ms Thresh. “As businesses embrace early identification and intervention to reduce the consequences of compromised foot health, the value of mobility scoring data will increase significantly. Automation will be one way to quickly grasp the benefits of more frequent mobility scoring.” |



Mobility scoring: 3D-camera tech improves frequency and accuracy