

NATURAL BORN HEALERS

Holly Mash believes that farmers can make the most effective homeopaths

IMAGE: SOIL ASSOCIATION / © SAINSBURY-PLAICE



How often do you read 'official' guidelines that are not just supportive of homeopathy, but go further and insist that homeopathy should be a key part of first line treatment? So, I was surprised and delighted to read in the Soil Association's standards that organic farmers should use complementary therapies, including homeopathy, as a first choice; preferably with professional veterinary guidance.

On the farm

Soil Association Certification Ltd is the leading certifying body for organic farmers, inspecting over 70% of organic businesses in the UK, the potential influence of homeopathy is huge. I donned my wellies and went out into the country to see how these strong guidelines were being met in practice.

After visiting several farms, it soon became clear that it was not just the organic farmers that were getting behind homeopathy and finding it useful. I discovered that many of the skills involved in good, traditional farming are actually the same as those essential in every competent homeopath. So, are all homeopaths would-be farmers? Or are farmers the new homeopaths?

Working with nature

Reflecting the UK's growing appetite for chemical-free food, the numbers of organic producers have been increasing dramatically. The organic farming sector is burgeoning by over 20% a year; and annual spending on organic goods now exceeds £2 billion. One effect of this 'commercial' explosion is that the farming community is increasingly looking for ways to keep conventional medicines and other chemical treatments to a minimum. This was certainly the motivation for several of the farmers I met at the 'Homeopathy at Wellie Level (HAWL) training day at Broadfield Farm in Gloucestershire (for more information on the HAWL courses visit www.hawl.co.uk).

Talking to farmers who had for some time been treating their stock themselves through homeopathy, I could see that it empowered them by placing value on their deep – often life-long – understanding and knowledge of their stock. The result was that they were able to pick up and act on signs of ill health at an early stage, so that illnesses were less likely to develop into serious problems. Most highlighted this as a key factor switching them on to homeopathy.

A dairyman told me that homeopathy "allows you to treat more emotional or psychological problems in the cows – things that there is no conventional treatment for, and things that the vet might laugh at you for mentioning". He pointed to the very grumpy cow that used to kick and be very agitated in the parlour: "She has been a different animal since her

dose of Staphysagria," he explained. In an industry where farmers are paid according to the quality of their milk it is interesting to note that, across the board, it is the organic producers who are in the top band. They are the *crème de la crème*.

Financial benefits

As well as its positive effects on health and welfare, using homeopathy can also be financially rewarding for the farmer for two immediately evident reasons.

Firstly, reducing the use of conventional veterinary medicines and treating livestock homeopathically will also reduce the problem of withdrawal periods. Homeopathic treatments do not have any withdrawal period in organic systems.

Secondly, by basing their year-round animal welfare programme on homeopathic principles, the farmer can gear routine veterinary intervention towards sampling and diagnosing particular infections and problems; as a result, he or she can carry out more intelligent and targeted treatment. This will inevitably save the farmer money as ultimately animals are treated only when affected, rather than as a 'blanket measure' across the whole herd.

So the idea that better health and welfare through homeopathy comes at a high cost and is therefore uneconomic is not true; it is quite the opposite. Healthy, homeopathically-treated farm animals will cost the farmer less to keep. They will produce higher quality, increased yields of milk and meat. They have higher fertility rates – bringing them in a higher return. It seems to me easy to make a very strong case that – for the farmer – using homeopathy is more economical.

Treating the individual

The health and productivity of livestock are at the heart of life on the farm. Talking to several farmers it was soon very apparent that homeopathy was an important tool in their disease prevention strategy. As Karl Barton, farm manager on the Goodwood Estate in West Sussex says, "for organic farmers, ingenuity, good management and homeopathy are their principal weapons against disease."

Of course, one of the guiding principles of homeopathy is "treatment of the individual not the disease." The intimate knowledge that the organic livestock farmer has of their individual animals means that most farmers can pick up on changes in their stock, in the same way that a parent can detect when their child has earache brewing or if the dog just was not being himself. As Liz Best says of her cows, "you see them slightly off colour before you see anything else." Just as with 'people patients', animals give the farmer clues into their individual characters all the time. He or she just needs to look and listen: observation is the key.

Watch and learn

At Liz Best's farm the twice daily routine of gathering the milking herd together is generally a relaxed affair, with the radio playing and the milking machines humming. The cows know what they are doing and what is going to happen. You almost feel, watching them, that it is a bit like a mothers meeting – a chance to gather and gossip! There are the pushy ones, the impatient ones, the naughty ones and the ones that stay at the back and stamp their feet. Some cows hurry out of the parlour, some amble, some stumble – they are showing us their different characters and weaknesses at every turn.

After spending just a few minutes watching a barn full of cattle or a field full of sheep you can start to pick out individual characters – the ones who are easily spooked, or the inquisitiveness of the calf that comes right up to you. And if you watch for long enough you may observe drinking habits, and notice whether they drink for a long time at once or just a few sips. You can notice whether a particular lame animal walks better on the soft straw or on the hard yard, or whether the cow who seems to be breathing heavily is leaning against the wall for support. Observation is the key.

Creatures of habit

Cows are very much creatures of habit. If the one that always comes into the parlour on the left side at the beginning of milking suddenly hangs back and comes in on the right side at the end, this will be a big marker to the dairyman. He will know something is sure to be up with her. Farmers will know when a particular individual is unwell by picking up on these subtle signs, such as the cow that stands on her own at the back of the herd, or the sow that stays on her own in the hut.

They will also understand how any change in routine or weather can have a huge impact on their animals, affecting normal behaviour patterns and susceptibility to disease. It may equally be the change of herdsman or the approaching thunderstorm that can cause anxiety, and set off a case of dormant mastitis in the sensitive individuals. As Karl Barton at Goodwood explains: "All beasts know when they're in trouble... they know by instinct what's going on."

Simple observation – but it takes years of experience to learn to notice all these things. The 'homeopathic' skill starts when the farmer begins to transform these 'common sense' observations into useful and, hence, valuable signs. As I said, I met several farmers looking to get started on the Homeopathy at Wellie Level course. It is a three-day course for farmers to learn the basics in homeopathy, held in Gloucestershire every year. It provides the farmers with a solid grounding in basic homeopathic principles and remedies, and gives them the confidence to realise

that they already have plenty of the skills and intuition that makes them 'natural homeopaths' – it may be that they just do not realise it yet!

Reducing the risk

On a working farm, homeopathic remedies are most commonly used to treat whole groups of animals, rather than individuals. This goes a long way in preventing problems at times of higher susceptibility, and hence disease risk – for instance, during transport or when the stock has to be rounded up for veterinary treatment or at calving and weaning.

It is well known, for example, that the stress of transporting cattle can be a precipitating factor to the development of pneumonia (so called 'shipping fever'). In such instances, doses of aconite before the journey to help combat the stress and shock can be an easy step in helping prevent such problems. Another everyday use of an acute remedy on the farm is that of ignatia. This can be given to dairy calves (and their mothers), when they are separated for they are surely grieving! Further examples are the blanket dosing of all calves within a group with pulsatilla as a treatment for scours, or the use of caulophyllum to dose all animals who are experiencing difficulties giving birth.

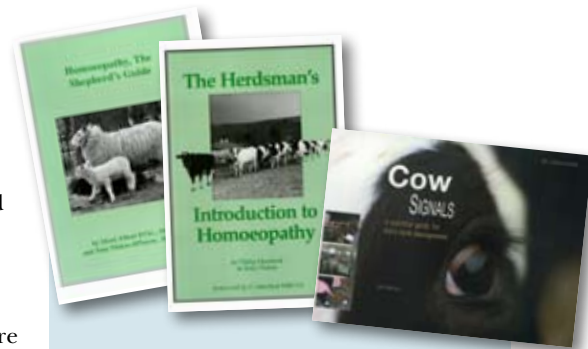
But perhaps the most common way in which homeopathy is used on the farm is the use of remedies called 'nosodes' as a holistic approach to herd health. Nosodes are remedies made from the bugs responsible for particular diseases, made from samples of infected tissue or discharges from affected animals. Karl Barton told me that by using a rotavirus nosode for a recent outbreak of the disease at Goodwood he did not lose a single animal. "I would have expected to lose about 3% of the calves if I had had to use conventional treatments," he said. The use of such remedies has to be of particular interest in the current climate in farming where there is the constant threat of epidemic diseases, such as foot and mouth and now bluetongue. However, I should point out that since both of these diseases are notifiable they are not applicable to homeopathic treatment under current legislation in the UK.

Perhaps it is self-evident that, with the number of organic farmers increasing, homeopathy's significance in the sphere of veterinary medicines is growing in importance. But returning from my farm visits, re-reading my notes, and reflecting on the Soil Association's 'homeopathy as first choice' guidance and its practical application in the burgeoning organic sector, perhaps one of my most interesting discoveries was the increase in the use of homeopathy in the non-organic sector. This reflects Liz Best's comment that she would "still be using homeopathy even if I wasn't organic." Not only quite a boost for the homeopathic movement, but positive-

sounding stuff for a medical system which seems to suffer more than its fair share of negativity in the human and domestic animal field. Maybe the last word on why homeopathy is proving to be such a hit on the farm should go to Liz Best: when asked why she was using homeopathy, she simply replied: "it's less trouble!"

Holly Mash is a veterinary surgeon specialising in holistic medicine. She is also working with the Soil Association to actively promote the use of homeopathy on farms. Visit www.hollymashvet.com

*To give us your feedback and for us find out how we can help you use homeopathy on your farm visit our special webpage on www.soilassociation.org/homeopathy **OF***



Read all about it

These books are available from the food and farming department:

Homoeopathy: The shepherd's guide

Elliot & Pinkus – £4.50 (incl p&p)
Written by a full time homeopathic vet and director of a homeopathic pharmacy, this handy guide introduces the concept and theories of homeopathy, before detailing treatments for specific ailments.

The Herdsman's Introduction to Homoeopathy

Hansford & Pinkus – £4.50 (incl p&p)
Written by a practising dairyman, this book covers how to select and prepare a remedy, choice of potency and administration. It has detailed information on treating specific diseases, injuries, bites and stings, digestive and skin disorders, mastitis, infertility and calving problems.

Cow Signals

Jan Hulsen – £20 (incl p&p)
A fascinating and richly illustrated alternative guide to dairy farm management. Cows continuously send out signals about their health, well-being, nutrition and production: the challenge for the dairy farmer is how to interpret and react to these signals.

To order call 0117 914 2400 or visit www.soilassociation.org/shop
For more information on the 'Homeopathy at Wellie Level' course visit www.hawl.co.uk

CASE STUDY

Long-standing organic dairy farmer, Will Best, explains why homeopathy is his first choice



“When we started conversion in the 1980s we were trying a little homeopathy, rather unsuccessfully, and also still using antibiotics. One day we had an antibiotic failure in our bulk milk. We were horrified and were determined to intensify our efforts to get away from using antibiotics so that such an event could not recur. The last thing that organic consumers wanted was low dose antibiotics in their milk! We also wanted to use a therapy which works with, rather than replaces, the animal’s immune system, as part of a strategy of developing naturally healthy herds and flocks.

Philip Hansford, our herdsman, began to seriously study and we began to try a variety of remedies, guided by George McLeod’s excellent handbooks. As we learnt more, so our prescribing became more accurate and the results improved. Soon we were able to give up both the use of ‘dry cow tubes’ and tubes and injections for clinical cases.

The results were that summer mastitis, which had always been a problem to us, disappeared, while the number of acute cases of mastitis in early lactation also reduced, although they never completely went away. One very positive side-effect is that newborn calves never get colostrum containing low doses of antibiotics, which I believe is damaging to their developing immune systems.

Unfortunately, the management of our covered yard was not good enough – straw not stored under cover, yard not cleaned out often enough – and we began to get suberis infections, which cleared up but often left the cows with high cell counts. Our bulk cell count got too high and we had to cull a few cows with persistently high counts, or convert them into nurses.

Now we are using silicone teat plugs at drying off. Combined with homeopathic remedies and nosodes and clean bedding, this gives us a rolling count of less than 150,000. We have a large drawer full of different remedies and potencies for treating all sorts of illnesses, with one exception: redwater. We think that we brought some infected ticks back from some grazing and we get a few cases every year, which we can only treat with the patent medicine with its huge withdrawal period. This will come right in time, as we graze all our calves on the affected pasture so that they grow up immune. Otherwise we never throw milk away: any milk we keep back from high cell count quarters is fed to calves or pigs.

Homeopathic remedies are getting more expensive but they are still cheaper than antibiotics, steroids, and so on. Remedies are usually given once or twice

a day: we buy them as granules and give them to patients off a (clean) teaspoon, usually as they leave the parlour. As the granules consist mainly of lactose and alcohol the cows love them! If a cow is really ill she may need the remedy more often, but then she will be in a loosebox anyway so it is no problem. We put the nosodes in the water troughs, usually once a week.

We have a good understanding with our vet practice, which we have used for generations. We established at the outset that we would continue to use them for surgery, diagnosis and advice, but that we would only use their prescriptions if we either felt incompetent to treat a case with homeopathy, or were not succeeding. This works well: we trust them to do their best for us and they trust us to give our stock the best possible care. We average about five visits a year, sometimes for emergencies, often for advice on why cows are not getting in calf, so that Phil knows what underlying causes to treat.”

Will and Pam Best have been producing organic milk for the last 20 years at Manor Farm in Godmanstone on the Dorset Downs. OF

