

Attitudes of farmers towards pain in pasture-based dairy cows

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Summary

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) reduce pain and inflammation and can therefore benefit cow welfare, recovery from various conditions and procedures, and production.
- Farmers are more likely to want NSAIDs used in their cattle for conditions and procedures they consider to be most painful; however, NSAID use was low for Burdizzo castration (calves), white line separation, mastitis (clots only) and calving (no assistance) despite them being considered painful.
- Farmers would benefit from education regarding the benefits of NSAIDs and should discuss a plan with their vet.
- Cost was not seen as a major limitation in the willingness of farmers to provide NSAIDs as part of dairy cow treatment.

Introduction

Pain in dairy cows is a huge welfare concern. Preventing and effectively recognising and treating pain is key for safeguarding the welfare of our dairy cows. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) have pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory properties, and can be used during various procedures (surgical and non-surgical), and to treat various diseases and conditions. Unlike anaesthetic drugs, which only provide short-term pain relief, NSAIDs provide pain relief for 24-72 hours per dose. The use of NSAIDs also improves the rate of recovery and can increase productivity. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can only be obtained via a veterinary prescription; however, farmers can administer NSAIDs themselves.

Teagasc pain relief survey

A survey to investigate the attitudes of farmers towards pain in pasture-based dairy cows was completed by over 1,000 dairy farmers in Ireland. Farmers were asked if they agreed or disagreed with various statements relating to pain and pain relief use in dairy cows. Participants were also required to give a pain score to various dairy cow and calf conditions and procedures (1 = no pain, 10 = worst imaginable pain). Farmers also reported if they would like a cow in their herd to receive NSAIDs for each of these conditions and procedures.

Conditions and procedures farmers considered to be most painful

The median pain scores for each condition and procedure are shown in Figure 1. Farmers scored caesarean section and digit amputation surgery as the most painful (score 9). Calving with no assistance (score 4) and mastitis (clots only; score 3) were considered the least painful. These pain scores can be used to benchmark farmers to determine their perception of pain.

Factors associated with NSAID use

Conditions and procedures seen as the most painful were associated with a greater willingness for NSAIDs to be used. This emphasises that farmers recognise pain and are generally willing for their cows to be treated with NSAIDs. Despite this, for Burdizzo

castration, white line separation, mastitis (clots only) and calving (no assistance), farmers wanted less NSAIDs used relative to the pain score (Figure 1). It is considered best practice to provide NSAIDs to all calves during castration.

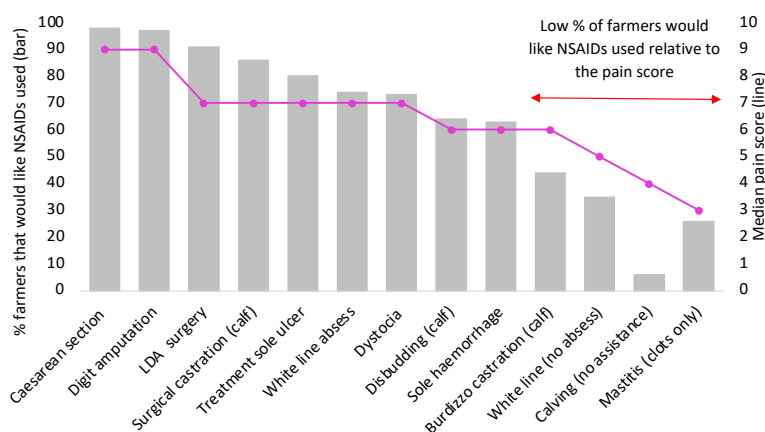


Figure 1. The median pain score given by farmers and the percentage of farmers that would like non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) used for each condition and procedure

Farmers who appeared to have less knowledge on the use of pain relief wanted less NSAIDs used as part of treatment. For example, farmers who disagreed that 'Cattle recover faster if given analgesic drugs' were less likely to want NSAIDs given to their cows. There is therefore a need to educate farmers on the benefits on NSAID use. Sixty-three percent of farmers agreed that 'Farmers do not know enough about controlling pain in cattle', and over 56% of farmers agreed that 'Vets do not discuss controlling pain in cattle with farmers enough'. Vets should be encouraged to discuss the use of NSAIDs with farmers more readily.

Cost of NSAIDs

Three quarters of participants agreed that farmers are happy to pay the cost of giving pain relief to dairy cows, with 90% agreeing that giving pain relief benefits the cow. This emphasises that vets should offer NSAIDs more readily when treating dairy cows. Farmers were also more willing to pay higher amounts for cow conditions and procedures as opposed to calf conditions and procedures.

Conclusion

This survey showed that generally Irish dairy farmers are aware of cattle pain and would like NSAIDs provided accordingly. Despite this, there are some conditions and procedures where NSAID use should be increased to improve dairy cow and calf welfare. The majority of dairy farmers agree that pain relief is beneficial as part of treatment and that cost was not an issue. Vets and farmers should discuss the benefits and use of NSAIDs within the herd.

Acknowledgements

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