

Identifying barriers to successful dairy cow lameness management using stakeholder focus groups

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Introduction

Lameness is a leading animal welfare concern in the dairy industry as it is painful and impacts cow longevity in the herd. Multiple stakeholders are involved in lameness management on a dairy farm including farmers, hoof trimmers, and veterinarians. The objective of this study was to explore perceptions of lameness and barriers to improved lameness management in these groups.

Materials and Methods

Twelve homogeneous focus groups were held in Minnesota and Wisconsin, USA from April 2017 to March 2020: 5 with farmers (n = 31), 4 with hoof trimmers (n = 31), and 5 with veterinarians (n = 25). The 1-hr facilitated discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and common themes identified through thematic analysis.

Results

All stakeholder groups cited time, cost, and facility limitations as barriers to lameness management. Members of each group also raised unique issues: farmers focused on the

routine strategies of lameness management as burdensome and/or futile, as hoof lesions persisted despite their efforts. Hoof trimmers described farmer prioritization of lameness as low, causing a delay in the detection and treatment of lame cows. Veterinarians viewed their role in lameness management as less involved compared to farmers or hoof trimmers and expressed the desire for farmers to implement lameness prevention strategies consistently (e.g. foot bathing). Despite shared concerns about lameness amongst these groups, respondents reported a lack of communication, especially between hoof trimmers and veterinarians.

Significance

These findings suggest a need for increased collaboration between farmers, hoof trimmers, and veterinarians to improve lameness management on dairy farms.