

AN ONTARIO HERD EXPERIENCE

Implementing a selective antibiotic treatment program at dry-off

By Ann Godkin
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Editor's note: This article was provided by Ann Godkin on behalf of the selective dry cow therapy project advisory committee, which includes producer Norm McNaughton, along with Guy Seguin and Ashley Wannamaker from Dairy Farmers of Ontario, Robyn Elgie from the Ontario Association of Bovine Practitioners, Richard Cantin from Lactanet Canada, Dave Kelton from the Ontario Veterinary College and Cynthia Miltenburg from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Eleanor Robinson, her husband, Jeff, and their family milk 75 Ayrshire cows near Osgood, Ont. The farm has undergone many changes since they started—evidence they are open to new ideas.

Inspired by a DHI seminar in January 2019, Robinson came home determined to try selective dry cow treatment (SDCT) for their herd. Until that time, all cows were being treated at the end of lactation. The herd's bulk tank somatic cell counts (SCCs) were below 200,000 cells per millilitre and Robinson, as the person who enters information into the herd management software, knew they were doing a good job tracking mastitis cases.

Judging by the continued decline of their bulk tank SCC and the lower numbers of mastitis cases, the program has been a success. Like all producers, Robinson thinks they could always do better and they need to keep trying to improve, but for more than two years, using less antibiotics at dry-off has worked well for this farm.

MOTIVATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING SDCT

Robinson was aware of an overall need to reduce antibiotic use as part of being a responsible producer, but one of the main motivations for SDCT was more pragmatic. She wanted to reduce her vet bill, especially the amount spent on antibiotics to treat cows she felt did not



» **ELEANOR ROBINSON** and her family successfully adopted selective dry cow treatment on their farm.

need the protection.

Robinson is the only person on the farm making treatment decisions. She relies on the monthly cow SCCs from DHI and her own on-farm records in DairyPlan to figure out which cows to treat.

By only treating the cows that had high SCCs during lactation, or those who had to be treated at some point for mastitis, she figures she's down to dry treating only one cow in every seven or eight dry-offs.

Robinson highlights not every farm's situation is the same. Practices that work well on one farm may not work as well elsewhere. In the case of the Robinsons, several factors contribute to the success of this SDCT program. Being able to handle late lactation cows as a special group is one of them. About three-quarters of the cows in the milking herd are housed in the freestall barn they built on the end of their original tiestall barn in 2007. The rest, including fresh cows, cows in heat and cows due to be dried off soon, are housed in tiestalls.

For late lactation cows, this means they can be fed separately and milked fewer times. As a result, milk production drops and cows are ready for dry-off. Robinson says she likes to see cows drop to 15 litres or less in the tiestalls as

the amount of hay in the diet increases. Cows rarely leak after dry-off.

Robinson herself is a major factor in this farm's successful adoption of selective dry cow treatment. She's very careful with record-keeping and tracks the performance of the cows closely. She monitors mastitis in early lactation, and there may be some cows she ultimately dry treats because they had a case of mastitis early on. She wonders now if some of these cows could be added to the group that doesn't receive antibiotics in the future. As an astute manager, even though things are going well, she's still looking for ways to optimize their dry cow program.

Keeping good records is critical for tracking what is done, Robinson says. She uses an on-farm notebook to record tasks to do and information to enter into the computer to help her keep close tabs on everything happening in the barn. While she hasn't had a chance to use Lactanet Canada's new fresh cow reports yet, she plans to take a look at them once they are available and see if they provide information she doesn't get from her computer records.

IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING SDCT

All agricultural commodities are looking closely at antibiotic use, as concern over increasing occurrence of resistance to important antibiotics gets more attention. While large volumes of antibiotics are not used in dairy production, many of the mastitis treatment products available contain compounds ranked as being critically important for treating infections in people.

About 75 to 80 per cent of antibiotic treatments for dairy cows are used for treating mastitis. Cows with signs of mastitis during lactation may still need to be treated depending on the cause. For some herds, cutting back on this mastitis treatment would be difficult, but reducing use by cutting back on treating cows that are not infected at dry-off is the best way for the industry to make a difference.

Options other than treatment are available. Mastitis prevention at dry-off can be enhanced with relatively small changes to management,



and teat ends can be protected with products, such as sealants.

The Robinsons' farm isn't the biggest in the province, nor the most modern. Like most farms, they've had their struggles and their triumphs. They work every day to improve what they do, care for their cows and produce the high-quality milk. Their attention to detail and management has paid off by consistently having excellent milk quality. Robinson has been dedicated to making this program work.

Many producers are like the Robinsons. Lactanet records suggest about 40 to 50 per cent of herds on milk recording are achieving herd SCC levels where selective dry cow treatment could work. Among these herds, about 50 per cent of their cows have SCCs that suggest they could be good candidates for no antibiotic treatment. When good milk quality is achieved, it's time to look at adjusting a herd's therapy strategies to efficiently match that performance.

Reducing the blanket treatment of cows with antibiotics at dry-off is something to consider. Producers should review their herd's overall milk quality performance and talk to their veterinarian to get an objective opinion. Veterinarians can help improve management, if needed, and help implement dry cow decision-making protocols if

selective antibiotic use is determined to be a good tool for the farm. As Robinson says, each herd owner needs to decide if this is the right approach for them. The motto regarding selective antibiotic use is still "as little as possible, but as much as needed." Producers should ask themselves if they're willing to be a champion for reducing unnecessary antibiotic use on their farm.

Ann Godkin

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DFO POLICY UPDATE NOTICE

Effective Dec. 1, 2020, Dairy Farmers of Ontario's (DFO) board approved changes to the shared facilities policy related to production catastrophes and producer medical conditions. For details, refer to the *Quota and Milk Transportation Policies* book on DFO's website at www.milk.org. Producers should direct any policy questions to their field services representative.



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RESPONSIBLE ANTIMICROBIAL USE

Resources to reduce the risk of mastitis and the need for antibiotics at dry-off

As part of Dairy Farmers of Ontario's educational and awareness efforts about antibiotic use, the selective dry cow therapy project committee has produced a series of materials to help dairy producers and their veterinarians make decisions about the suitability of using antibiotics selectively at dry-off for a herd.

Newly posted on the project website are seven podcasts with industry experts and producers discussing issues around antibiotic use globally, provincially and on Ontario dairy farms. Producers can access these podcasts at www.scc200.ca.

Other resources available on this website include fact sheets, reference tables and guides to interpreting the new Lactanet fresh cow reports.