



Seeing is Believing The Art of Observation

And believing is doing something about it. The art of observation is natural to a few, but for most of us it is an art we have to practice and practice to become proficient in. As managers and workers on dairy farms, you need to hone your skills when it comes to noticing details of cows, their behaviour and environments.

A job I have always considered important is getting the cows in for milking, especially afternoon milking. This time can be most profitably spent observing your cows or an opportunity wasted, or even worse, a time which the herdsman considers he is most efficient pushing cows with dogs at their heels to minimise the time taken to get cows from the paddock to the dairy. This attitude only results in reduced milk yield and is a major cause of lameness.

Let's start by quietly riding to the paddock the cows are grazing, taking the time to notice where the cows are in the paddock. Crowding at the gate doesn't indicate you have trained them well to come home around three o'clock. My guess is they have not had enough to eat in the paddock today. Respond by increasing grain in the dairy by $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 kg to try and cover this deficit in dry matter intake – they do reward good managers. Maybe the water trough has some unusual attraction. Has the float valve jammed or is it simply warm weather and flow rate of water is not adequate to meet demand. Nothing reduces milk like thirsty cows; also grain eaten in the dairy can be reduced from the same cause, multiplying milk drops.

Manure, especially in the paddock, is an excellent indicator of rumen function and efficiency. Loose manure is an indicator of possibly, acidosis, too rapid passage of feed through the digestive tract, lack of fibre, especially 'effective fibre', or most commonly, all of the above; they usually all go hand in hand. Cracked grain or leafy forage in the manure also indicates fast passage through the rumen. We all complain about the cost of feeding cows yet pay little attention to feed conversion efficiency. Only a well balanced diet will return you maximum milk for your feed dollar. The ingredients are energy, protein and fibre, minerals, both micro and macro, rumen modifiers and buffers, all in their correct measures. A healthy and efficient rumen will produce a manure pat about 40 mm high. Less than this would suggest the above scenario, higher than this would indicate too much fibre and hence reduced milk production as a result of lowered dry matter intake. Pock marks on top of the manure are an indication of excess nitrogen (protein), which is not just costly but has

ramifications on fertility and liver function due to excessive weight loss through high negative energy balance and body fat mobilization. Monitor manure daily, another high return management practice.

Lameness. Now I'm not talking about the cow trying to walk on three legs. She's obvious, or should be. There is an art called 'locomotion scoring'. It involves keen observation of how arched cow's backs are, the greater the arch the greater the incidence of lameness and possible laminitis. Many lame cows can have more than one sore foot, especially when zinc deficiency or acidosis is the problem. They will still walk on all four feet but will be arched as a result of more than one painful foot. Look for swelling or redness of the tissue immediately above the hoof; this is a good indicator of acidosis and laminitis. This is easily noticed while cupping on.

Rough and dirty coat are associated with mineral deficiency. Flightiness often suggests grass tetany and magnesium deficiency. Lethargy indicates an unbalanced ration. Half the herd should be chewing their cud by 10 am, if not; lack of fibre may be an issue and, again, acidosis and reduced feed efficiency. All of these are draining your profits and can be easily and profitably addressed.

Cows should enter the dairy calmly. Assistance with poly pipe or aggressive dogs causes the release of adrenalin which blocks oxytocin, the let down hormone. Observe the daily milk slip figures. Cows don't drop in milk or BF% and Milk P% just to upset us. There is good reason and they are management monitors for our profit benefit.

Dry cows are next years profit. Frequently they suffer "back paddock syndrome", weight loss during their dry period. Look at your remaining milking cows and compare BCS with the drys. Are they losing weight? Nothing will cost more than lost BCS. I believe a loss of 1 BCS while dry will reduce her lactation by 1000 litres.

Finally, the calves. Try sitting in the calf pen for 5 minutes. Did you get a wet bottom? Did you find it hard to find a spot to sit without sitting in manure, and was it watery or acrid smelling? Were the flies annoying? Did you cough and struggle for breath due to the strong smell of ammonia in the air? Thank your mum for how she nursed you.

When we practice these skills of observation, we learn things that tell us what is going on from the cow's point of view. And that's the view that matters if you want to be profitable.