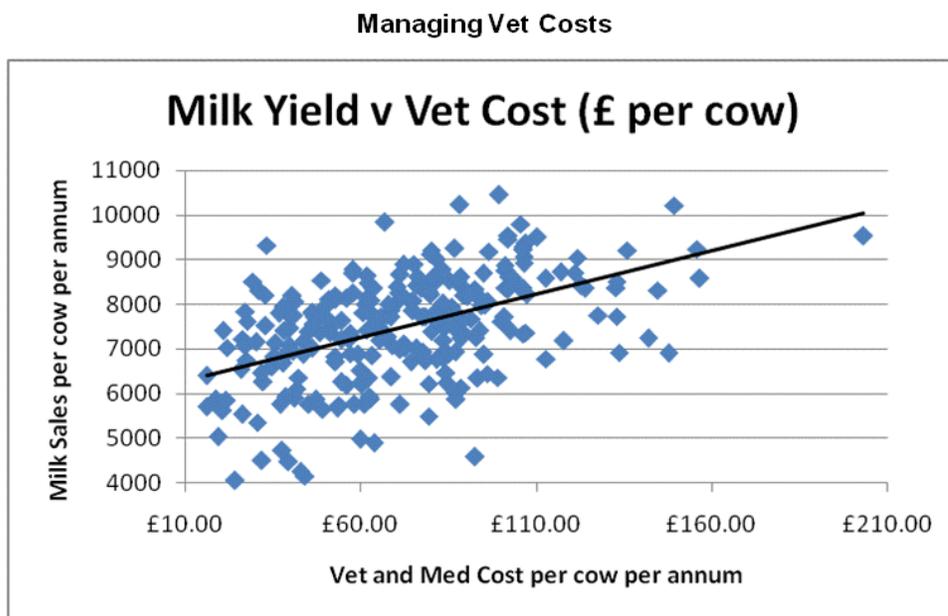


## TIME TO REVIEW VET COSTS

**A new study shows there continues to be a huge variation in vet costs per cow and Promar National Dairy Consultant Derek Gardner suggests this is one area where farmers might be able to reduce production costs by a more proactive approach to disease management and reap the further benefit of a more productive herd.**

Reporting on an analysis of data from over 250 Promar Farm Business Accounts costed dairy herds, Mr Gardner believes that while, on average vet and medicines account for somewhere around 5% of the total cost of milk production, on some farms there is considerable scope to reduce the total cost.

The analysis shows a range from under £20 per cow to over £200 per cow (see graph). For a 150 cow herd, this represents a £25,000 difference in the size of the annual vet bill.



“The graph shows that costs generally increase with yield but I don’t think this should be taken for granted. Why do they increase with yield? What are the main reasons and can they be tackled? Should it be true that cows require more veterinary intervention just because they produce more? The graph also demonstrates that there is a considerable range in vet costs at any given yield. For example at 7500 litres annual yield, vet costs vary from £15 – 130 per cow and the question has to be why?”

Mr Gardner is quick to point out that the different is not due to individual charges but is more about how the vet is used. “Dairy vets in this country are highly skilled and do an excellent job but perhaps farmers could question how they work with their vet.

“The biggest factor driving the difference in vet costs per cow is prevention rather than cure and it is still true that prevention is cheaper as not only can it reduce vet bills, it can also reduce the production losses associated with the principle diseases of dairy cows.”

Using lameness as an example, Mr Gardner suggests the herds with lower average vet costs will be those where time is invested in regular slurry scraping to avoid cows standing in dirty passageways. These farms will also be routinely hoof trimming properly as a preventative measure and will ensure the diet contains adequate levels of zinc and biotin to encourage strong, healthy hoof growth.

“Together these measures should reduce the number of lame cows requiring veterinary intervention”

Mr Gardner believes similar savings can be achieved through measures to reduce mastitis. “Routine measures such as keeping beds clean and dry, ensuring good ventilation, regular checking of milking machine function, adopting a strict milking routine and early intervention with problem cows will help reduce the incidence and spread of clinical mastitis.”

The other area where management approaches can help reduce the reliance on the vet is fertility. Mr Gardner comments that paying attention to cow grouping, reducing stress, ensuring a well-constructed dry cow diet and just making sufficient time for heat detection can all help.

“On all farms, no matter how good prevention measures are there will be times when the vet is needed and the aim then must be to get the most from the visit.

“Routine visits can be a good approach as the vet will be seeing several cows at the same time and use of action lists can ensure all problem animals are seen.

“Farms with lower vet costs per cow also see the vet as an integral member of the team managing the cows and will have regular meetings between the owner, herd manager, vet and feed management consultant. These meetings allow problem areas to be discussed and can help improve preventative measures.

“Taking time to assess how to get the most from the vet while also improving milk output will reduce the vet cost per litre sold and will be time well spent,” Mr Gardner concludes.