

A questionnaire survey on availability and management of hospital pens for Danish dairy cows

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Sick dairy cows may have different needs compared to healthy cows and may therefore benefit from a stay in a hospital pen. However, although the presence of hospital pens on Danish dairy farms is mandatory, little information about the availability and management of these hospital pens is available. The purpose of this study was, by use of a questionnaire-based survey, to provide descriptive information about availability and management of hospital pens on Danish dairy farms.

The survey was emailed to 1296 dairy producers with an overall response rate of 24% including both conventional (88%) and organic (12%) farms with a median herd size of 150 cows (range 25 -1200). Almost all respondents (98%) had the possibility to move a sick or injured cow away from the milking herd. For 40% of the respondents the hospital area consisted of one or more single pens (for one cow), while 30% had group pen(s) and 30% had both. Among group pens 45% were designated hospital pens (as opposed to pens also used for e.g. calving). The most frequently cited conditions that would always result in moving the cow to a hospital pen were hip displacement (80%), milk fever (77%), displaced abomasum (65%) and severe cases of lameness (65%). However, large variation among which conditions would lead to the use of hospital pens was found between respondents. In 86% of the farms information regarding sick cows was passed on between employees in a systematic way (orally or written).

There is a lack of specified scientific substantiated recommendations for farmers about the facilities and management of hospital pens. Therefore, respondents were asked to evaluate if they believed that number of hospital pens and the facilities in the hospital pens matched the needs of the sick and injured cows on their farm. Surprisingly, 20% stated that their farm had too few pens and 36% found the facilities inadequate to fully match the needs of sick cows. This warrants for more scientific knowledge on the needs of sick cow in order to create evidence based guidelines for facilities and management of hospital pens.

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