

# Grass roots homeopathy

*Holly Mash* discovers why farmers make natural homeopaths

How often do you read “official” guidelines that are not just supportive of homeopathy, but go further and insist that homeopathy must be a key part of first line treatment? So I was surprised and delighted to read in The Soil Association’s rules and regulations for organic farmers that farmers should use complementary therapies, including homeopathy, as a first choice, preferably with professional veterinary guidance.

As The Soil Association is the leading certifying body for organic farmers, regulating over 70 per cent of organic produce in the UK, the potential influence of homeopathy was huge. So I donned my wellies and went out into the country to see how these strong guidelines were being met in practice. And, after visiting several farms, it soon became clear that it wasn’t just the organic farmers who were getting behind homeopathy and finding it useful. I discovered that many of the skills involved in good, traditional farming are actually the same as those essential in every competent homeopath! So are we all would-be farmers or are farmers the new homeopaths?

## Organic farming

Reflecting the UK’s growing appetite for chemical-free food, the numbers of organic producers have been increasing dramatically. The organic farming sector is burgeoning by over 30 per cent per year with annual spending on organic goods reaching the £2bn mark. One spin-off from this “commercial” explosion has seen the farming community increasingly looking for ways to keep conventional medicines and other chemical treatments to a real minimum. This was certainly the motivation for several of the farmers I met who had signed up for the “Homeopathy at Wellie Level” training course that I attended at Broadfield Farm in Gloucestershire.

Talking to farmers who had, for some time, been treating their stock themselves

through homeopathy, I could see that it empowered them by placing value on their deep, often life-long, understanding and knowledge of their stock. The result was that they were able to pick up and act on signs of ill health at an early stage so that illnesses were less likely to develop into serious problems. Most highlighted this as a key factor switching them on to homeopathy.

A dairyman told me that homeopathy “allows you to treat more emotional or psychological problems in the cows – things that there is no conventional treatment for and things that the vet might laugh at you for mentioning!” He pointed to the very grumpy cow that used to kick and be very agitated in the parlour. “She has been a different animal since her dose of Staphysagria!”



In an industry where farmers are paid according to the quality of their milk which is assessed and graded, it is interesting to note that across the board it is the organic producers who are in the top band – the crème de la crème!

As well as its positive effects on health and welfare, using homeopathy can also be financially rewarding for the farmer, for two immediately evident reasons. Firstly, reducing the use of conventional veterinary medicines and treating livestock homeopathically will reduce the problems of “withdrawal periods” – the specified period after every conventional drug treatment when milk or meat from the treated animal cannot go into the human food chain.

Secondly, through basing his year-round animal welfare programme on homeopathic principles, the farmer can gear routine veterinary intervention towards sampling and diagnosing particular infections and problems and is able, as a result, to carry out more intelligent and targeted treatment. This will inevitably save money as drugs will ultimately only be used to treat affected animals rather than as a “blanket measure” across the whole herd.

So the idea that better health and welfare, through homeopathy, comes at a high cost and is therefore uneconomic is wrong, quite the opposite is true. Healthy, homeopathically-treated farm animals will cost the farmer less to keep and will produce higher quality and increased yields of milk and meat, and higher fertility rates – bringing them in a higher return. It seems to me that a very strong case can be made that, for the farmer, using homeopathy is *more* economical.

The health and productivity of livestock are at the heart of life on the farm, and talking to farmers it was soon clear that to many of them homeopathy is an important tool in their disease prevention strategy. As Karl Barton, Farm Manager on The Goodwood Estate in West Sussex says, “For organic farmers ingenuity, good management and homeopathy are their principal weapons against disease.”

### Observation is the key

Of course, one of the guiding principles of homeopathy is “treatment of the individual not the disease”. So one might wonder how on earth can this be put into practice on the farm, where one animal in a yard full of other animals looks very like another? Anyone who knows farmers won't be at all surprised to learn



that they know the individual animals in their stock in just the same way that you would be able to detect when your child has earache brewing, or if your dog just “wasn't himself”. As Liz Best says of her cows, “You see them slightly off colour before you see anything else.”

Just as with “people patients”, animals give the farmer clues into their individual characters all the time. He just needs to look and listen. Observation is always the key. As Hahnemann wrote in footnote 2 of *The Organon*: “*Treat according to the patients' symptoms. We do not need to look for invisible causes. Cure only the observable symptoms.*”

At Liz Best's farm the twice-daily routine of gathering the milking herd together is generally a relaxed affair, with the radio playing and the milking machines humming. The cows know what they are doing and what is going to happen and you almost feel, watching them, that it is a bit like a mothers' meeting – a chance to gather and gossip! There are the pushy ones, the impatient ones, the naughty ones and the ones that stay at the back and stamp their feet. Some cows hurry out of the parlour, some amble, some stumble – they are showing us their different characters and

weaknesses at every turn.

After spending just a few minutes watching a barn full of cattle or a field full of sheep you can start to pick out individual characters – that one at the back who is easily spooked or the inquisitiveness of the calf that comes right up to you. And if you watch for long enough you may observe drinking habits and notice whether they drink for a long time at once or just a few sips. You can notice whether a particular lame animal walks better on the soft straw or on the hard yard; or whether the cow who seems to be breathing heavily is leaning against the wall for support. Observation is the key.

Cows are very much creatures of habit. If the one that always comes into the parlour on the left side at the beginning of milking suddenly hangs back and comes in on the right side at the end, this will be a big marker to the dairyman, he'll know something is sure to be up with her! Farmers will know when a particular individual is unwell by picking up on subtle signs such as the cow that stands on her own at the back of the herd, or the sow that is on her own in the hut.

They will also understand how any change in routine or weather can have



Photos: courtesy of Holly Mash

a huge impact on their animals, affecting normal behaviour patterns and susceptibility to disease. It may equally be the change of herdsman or the approaching thunderstorm that can cause anxiety and set off a case of dormant mastitis in the sensitive individuals. As Karl Barton at Goodwood explains, “All beasts know when they’re in trouble... they know by instinct what’s going on.”

Simple observation – but it does take years of experience to learn to notice all these things. The “homeopathic” skill starts when the farmer begins to transform these common sense observations into useful and hence valuable signs!

As I said, I met several farmers looking to get started, on “Homeopathy at Wellie Level”, a three-day course for farmers to learn the basics in homeopathy. It provides the farmers with a solid grounding in basic homeopathic principles and remedies and confidence to realise that they already have plenty of the skills and intuition that makes them natural homeopaths – it may be that they just don’t realise it yet!

### Holistic approach

On a working farm, homeopathic remedies are most commonly used to treat

whole groups of animals, rather than individuals. This goes a long way in preventing problems at times of higher susceptibility and hence disease risk: for instance during transportation, at calving and weaning, or when the stock has to be rounded up for veterinary treatment. It is well known, for example, that the stress of transporting cattle can be a precipitating factor to the development of pneumonia (so called “shipping fever”). In such instances, doses of Aconite before the journey to help combat the stress and shock can be an easy step in helping prevent such problems.

Another everyday use of an acute remedy on the farm is that of Ignatia. This can be given to dairy calves (and their mothers) when they are separated at two days old, for they are surely grieving. Further examples are the blanket dosing of all calves within a group with

Pulsatilla – as a treatment for Scours (diarrhoea), or the use of Caulophyllum to dose all animals who are experiencing difficulties giving birth.

But perhaps the most common way in which homeopathy is used on the farm is the use of remedies called nosodes as an holistic approach to herd health. Nosodes are remedies made from the bugs responsible for particular diseases, taken from samples of infected tissue or discharges from affected animals.

Karl Barton told me that by using a rotavirus nosode for a recent outbreak of the disease at Goodwood he did not lose a single animal. “I would have expected to lose about three per cent of the calves if I had had to use conventional treatments.” The use of such remedies has to be of particular interest in the current climate in farming where there is the constant threat of epidemic diseases such as Foot and Mouth and now Blue Tongue. *(However I should point out that both of these diseases are notifiable – which means that farmers may not attempt treatment and must report it to DEFRA – so are not applicable to homeopathic treatment under current legislation in the UK.)*

Perhaps it is self-evident that with the number of organic farmers increasing, homeopathy’s significance in the sphere of veterinary medicines is growing in importance. But returning from my farm visits, re-reading my notes, and reflecting on The Soil Association’s “homeopathy as first choice” rule and its practical application in the burgeoning organic sector, perhaps one of my most interesting discoveries was the increase in the use of homeopathy in the non-organic sector, reflecting Liz Best’s comment that she’d “still be using homeopathy even if I wasn’t organic”.

Not only quite a boost for the homeopathic movement, but positive-sounding stuff for a medical system which seems to suffer more than its fair share of negativity in the human and domestic animal field. Maybe the last word on why homeopathy is proving to be such a hit on the farm should go to Liz Best who, when I asked her why she was using homeopathy simply said, “It’s less trouble!”



Holly Mash BVSc VetMfHom IVAS MRCVS qualified from Bristol University in 2001, and worked in mixed practice for a year before specialising in companion animals. In 2003 she worked in a holistic veterinary practice in Sydney and studied traditional Chinese medicine gaining her IVAS acupuncture certification. Holly became a VetMfHom last year and is enjoying treating her expanding caseload in both Bristol and London.