



August 2009

## To bite or not to bite

Pigs have the same basic desires as us - eating and sex, both of these being essential for the continuation of the species.

Recent research at Queens University, Belfast has shown that pigs in enriched environments will spend 33% of daylight hours rooting substrate. This rooting is expressed in order to satisfy the basic eating drive, mimicking the pig in the wild. Outdoor pigs express a similar pattern of behaviour.

From the work at Queens it was found that the time spent in commercial pens nosing walls, faeces, and pen-mates equated to 33% of daylight hours. This would suggest pigs have a need to root, even in the absence of substrate, driven by a reward mechanism.

This behaviour is unacceptable when the pigs begins to inflict harm by ear or tail biting. The behaviour, often instinctive, has economic and welfare costs to the producer.



This vice is often triggered by a stress, nutritional, environmental or social. What can be done to stop this behaviour? Pigs can be calmed through nutritional manipulation by using products such as Devijex (available through Devenish Nutrition). This product changes the neuron-transmitter balance in the brain helping the animal cope with the stressor and preventing the automatic switch to harmful behaviour.

## Improvac

This innovative product is a vaccine which works by producing antibodies against GnRF, this simply produces a temporary suppression to testicular function. Pfizer, the manufacturer, state uses as follows:

- ⊗ As an alternative to physical castration
- ⊗ To reduce boar taint caused by the key boar taint compound androstenone, in entire males following the onset of puberty

Improvac can be used in male pigs from 8 weeks of age with a second vaccination 4-6 weeks prior to slaughter, importantly there should be at least a 4 week gap between vaccinations.

If you require more information on the use of this product and its suitability for your business please speak to your vet in the first instance.

## Porcilis PCV

Intervet/Schering Plough have recently launched their Porcine Circovirus Type 2 vaccine which has a licence for use in piglets. The product is currently licenced for use on a two shot regime. To discuss this product further please contact your veterinary surgeon.

## Hospital Pens

The purpose of a hospital pen is to allow pigs that are unable to compete within the main unit, either because of injury or disease, a good chance of recovering sufficiently to be marketed. Good care of injured or sick stock by providing suitable facilities, together with appropriate nutrition, nursing and treatment, can help improve unit efficiency and performance, as well as improving the welfare of the affected pigs.

### What recovery rates should I be expecting?

Correctly managed, it should prove possible to market 70% of the pigs entering hospital accommodation. This will fluctuate, dependent upon health breakdowns, but is the minimum target that should be aimed for in 'stable health' situations. Properly identifying pigs entering hospital pens and recording their outcomes will give a better indication of how well the hospital pens are being managed (and how promptly pigs are being identified as requiring hospitalisation), rather than relying on 'gut feel'.

### How many pens are required?

The number of pens required will differ between units, but in general, it is better to have several small hospital pens, rather than one large pen. We commonly see units with an inadequate number of pens, resulting in pigs remaining within the main pig enterprise that require removal and too wide a variety of sizes, ages and stages of recovery within a pen, lowering overall recovery rates.

Ideally, suitable hospital accommodation should be available for each area of the unit – i.e. weaners, growers and finishers, with two or three pens for each stage of production, as detailed in the flow diagram below. It is ideal to ensure that the hospital pens are emptied, pressure washed and disinfected regularly to avoid too high a disease challenge within the pens themselves – aim to empty pens at least every 6 weeks.

### Where should pens be sited?

Potentially, hospital pens are the 'sickest' part of a farm. It makes sense to place them remote from the main pig population, but such that they are still properly observed and managed. Suitable pens at the edge of the unit are ideal. Ideally, separate overalls and boots would be available for this area of the unit, but a regularly changed footbath is the minimum that should be provided.

### What should the pen contain?

Hospital pens should provide warm, draught-free accommodation with easily accessible feed and water (ensure both fresh and palatable). The use of heat lamps can be beneficial for small pigs. Legally, hospital pens are also required to have (an area of) bedding – either straw or shavings is best, straw also aiding thermal comfort (Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2003, Schedule 6, Part 2, Paragraph 6). High energy intakes are required to encourage recoveries and therefore it is important to maximise feed quality and freshness. Ideally, the water system should enable water medication of pigs

### How long should I hospitalise a pig?

All pigs within the hospital system should be carefully assessed daily. At the end of each week, pigs showing improvement should be continued with, pigs 'holding their own' reviewed re likely further improvements and pigs that have deteriorated are best euthanased (on day of deterioration). Remember to accurately record all medicine usage within the hospital pens. This includes any water medication.

### What do I do with the recovered pigs?

The rule should always be, that once a pig enters hospital accommodation, it NEVER re-enters the main pig flow. The aim should be to market pigs directly from the hospital area/designated 'slow track' pens.

Remember to ensure that all withdrawal times are up before pigs are marketed and that relevant paperwork is completed to accompany pigs to slaughter.