

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

DIETETIC DRINK USED TO COMBAT PIGLET DIARRHOEA

Health management

Diarrhoea in the farrowing house is a problem familiar to every pig breeder. But one farm in Wolfsburg (Thuringia) has succeeded in nipping neonatal scours in the bud with the aid of a special dietetic drink. Below is an account of how they did it.

Neonatal diarrhoea is a recurrent problem in suckling piglets, especially in the first few days after farrowing. It is usually triggered by *E. coli*, but also by clostridial infections. Not even farms whose health status is otherwise very high - like this particular sow unit in Wolfsburg - are spared. Housed in its pens, which have undergone extensive modernisation in recent years, are around 1,100 sows with their first or subsequent litters, which produce some 25,000 piglets every year (i.e. around 23 piglets per sow).

The majority of these - about 20,000 piglets in all - are sent, via fixed supply contracts and a single dealer, to fattening units in Westphalia. Batches of around 400 piglets are supplied every week. The remaining animals are then either fattened in-house or else they are used as replacements in the farm's own sow herd. Except for semen, no extraneous animal material has entered the unit for the past 10 years. As far as health status is concerned, the herd is PRRS-free and there are no problems with circoviruses. "We vaccinate the piglets against mycoplasma. They are given a one-shot vaccine on introduction to the flat deck at around day 28 post-farrowing - simply because that is what the fatteners want", explains farm manager Karin Schnabel.

Dietetic drink instead of an injection

What does occasionally cause problems, however, is piglet diarrhoea - especially during the first week after farrowing. All sows receive preventive immunisation against *E. coli* prior to farrowing. As a specific safeguard against clostridia (types A and C have both been detected in the herd), it has for many years been the practice to give the piglets a penicillin preparation immediately after farrowing and then again 12 hours later. "In spite of this, there is always the odd litter where piglets are affected by diarrhoea", says Karin Schnabel. "In the past, the only remedy was an injection of antibiotic plus an additional electrolyte solution to prevent their tiny, weakened bodies from rapidly dehydrating." It was found, however, that absorption of the conventional electrolyte solutions was usually unsatisfactory. The situation has changed over the past 18 months or so. "Now, with Suiferm plus we have access to a highly effective remedy for diarrhoea in the form of a dietetic drink, which in the large majority of cases dispenses with the need for additional antibiotic therapy", reports Karin Schnabel. And yet she was initially sceptical when her vet gave her several trial packs of the new, not exactly cheap preparation, which in addition to electrolytes and glucose also contains probiotic lactic-acid bacteria. "After all," she comments, "how often nowadays do you see miracle drugs advertised that don't deliver anywhere near what they promise. But it really was amazing how quickly the new product took effect".

According to Ms Schnabel, this aromatic dietetic drink, which has the colour of cocoa and the consistency of coffee cream, was very palatable to the piglets and its effect is visible after just one day of treatment, even in animals with fairly severe diarrhoea. In Wolfsbehringen this dietetic drink is now given as a matter of course over a three-day period to all litters that are observed to be displaying initial signs of neonatal diarrhoea. On average, 10-15% of all litters fall into this category. "The piglets now recover far more quickly; they are livelier, plumper and reach good weights at weaning. And the usual dip in performance is largely offset", she emphasises. The weaning weights after the 4-week suckling period are consistently between 8.9 and 9.3 kg per piglet. According to Ms Schnabel, the health of the weaning groups is very stable and homogeneous - which also has a positive effect in the flat deck. Here the daily weight gains recorded during the 6-week rearing period average 485 g, with a mortality rate of under one per cent.

Karin Schnabel proceeds to point out further benefits of this method of treating diarrhoea. For example, it avoids the stress (for man and animal) of treating individual animals by injection. In addition, the product is said to be easy to handle and there is no question of promoting resistance. "Also Suifer plus is not subject to documentation requirements, which on a fairly large farm like ours saves both the vet and the farm manager a lot of paperwork", says Ms Schnabel.

Position bowls correctly

It has been found worthwhile to administer the dietetic drink in bowls that have a relatively low rim, which makes them easier for the smaller piglets, in particular, to reach. "With this in mind, the manufacturer, Chevita, has developed a special bowl, which is supplied free of charge, via the vet, with every pack of the dietetic drink", says Ms Schnabel. Affected litters are each given around a quarter of a litre of this special drink twice a day, morning and evening. "The important thing is to position the bowls close to the piglet nest", she stresses. Over 500 litters in Wolfsbehringen have now been treated with the new diarrhoea product since October 2002. "In view of its excellent efficacy, we are happy to recommend this new treatment concept", says Ms Schnabel. In farms with more severe diarrhoea problems, it might even make sense to use the dietetic drink prophylactically in every litter. Indeed, last summer - when an above-average number of litters were struck by diarrhoea - they themselves treated two entire farrowing groups in this manner, she reports. And what about the cost of using the dietetic drink? Karin Schnabel estimates this at between EUR 1.50 and 2.00 per litter treated. When extrapolated to the total number of piglets reared on the farm, this gives a cost of around six to seven cents per piglet. "If you consider the effect obtained, this is money well spent", she concludes.

PHOTOS:

N° 1: Karin Schnabel has plenty to laugh about: problems with piglet diarrhoea have now practically been eliminated.

N° 2: The nursing sows in Wolfsbehringen are intensively managed with the piglets. The reward is low mortality.

N° 3: The modernised unit houses around 1,100 sows with a high health status.

Photos: Wühst