



What is your cow telling you?

Reading cow body language and responding to the signals are vital skills needed to ensure animal health and welfare remain high, says a leading international expert.

Dutch vet Dr Joep Driessen has been brought to New Zealand by VetSouth and DairyNZ to run workshops on cow signals and seminars on stockmanship for housing systems.

He developed his Cow Signals training programme, which has an emphasis on housed systems, in 2000 and has taken the concept to more than 40 countries.

The main emphasis of the programme was to train farmers to recognise what the body language of each cow said.

Cows needed sufficient amounts of feed, water, light, air, space and rest, and if they received enough of those, they no longer had a reason to get sick, he said.

Not having those six elements –

easily available in a pasture-based system – equally balanced in a housed system could destroy cow's health and welfare, as well as a farmer's income.

But one of the biggest disease threats to a farm was "owneritis", where farmers failed to see the impact of their management mistakes, Driessen said.

"The body language of the cow is the best management adviser. If you can read the cow, you know what to do."

If farmers spotted waiting cows, curved backs and empty rumens, then early steps could be taken to resolve the problems.

Good housing design and simple management systems were also essential to ensuring housed cows remained healthy.

The concept was quite simple once clearly explained, he said.

VetSouth director Mark Bryan said Driessen was highly regarded for his work, with much of the focus on the housing of cattle.

The idea that farmers should focus their approach around the cow sounded obvious but it could be easy to lose sight of that, he said.

Focusing on the cow was critical, he said.

"Often people don't even think how a cow thinks or feels so if people can understand how a cow works, that's fantastic, it makes a lot of difference."

Indoor wintering sheds are increasing in popularity in Southland. Farmers needed to consider the cows' response to cubicle barns and this was being revealed by Driessen, Bryan said.

The day workshops aimed at general animal husbandry were designed to help upskill staff because it was recognised there were significant skill gaps in the industry. Some of that had been caused by the rapid growth in the sector in Southland, he said.

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Cow signals: VetSouth director Mark Bryan, left, with "cow whisperer" Dr Joep Driessen, from the Netherlands, who has been in Southland telling farmers how to work out what cows are thinking