

Emma Trueman

Emma is a young cattle farmer on Morridge. She describes what happened after one routine TB test in 2017. The lump that she describes can be an early indicator of TB and is measured for change by an inspecting vet.

Part Two. The vagaries of TB testing

SH. You've had some issues with TB up here?

ET. Yeah, it was 12 months ago. We came in for the annual test and they found one IR (Inconclusive Reactor) so that was retested 60 days later and the lump on that hadn't changed, so she went as a reactor. When they killed her, they deemed her TB free so there was nothing anywhere. We then did another test because at that time they wanted you to have another test 60 days later. So, we had a test sixty days later and the vet passed everything and then on the following Monday Defra rang and graded one to a reactor and it had got to be shot on the farm as an emergency slaughter.

SH. Why?

ET. They said the vet had read the TB test wrong; it was read on the wrong chart and this animal needed to be shot there and then and.....

SH. Why couldn't it go to an abattoir?

ET. Basically, they didn't trust that I would leave the animal up here. There was a big trust thing. My argument was it was clear on the test, but they said they'd issued the wrong test chart, so instead of being read on...., you've got Standard and Severe, they said it was read wrong, and she was a reactor and needed to go.

SH. But you hadn't actually had TB before that according to them, you were clear, weren't you?

ET. Yes, completely clear. I managed to get somebody to come and value the animal as I said she wasn't going anywhere. She was a pedigree heifer, she was two and a half years old and had just calved. So on the valuation chart there was nothing; there isn't a price for that. So, they just told me I'd have to suck it up and they'd pay me the commercial killing rate.

SH. And this was one of your special pedigree cattle as well as killing a young cow with a baby calf at foot.

ET. To us when it was done it wasn't a reactor and to the vet it wasn't a reactor.

SH. So what happened?

ET. I managed to get someone to come and value it and they were due to come here at 4 o'clock on the Tuesday. They came and the slaughterman was here at half four to kill it. I didn't get any time to even lodge an appeal, nothing. They said she had to be shot in the shed, they wouldn't let me take her out into a pen. At that time, I'd got an old stock bull, so he was not very happy, neither were all the other cattle. We calmed him down and the next day the duty vet rung up to say the animal was TB clear and she shouldn't have gone, which was sickening, absolutely sickening. So, at that point they said because she shouldn't have gone and because she was TB free, they didn't know if they were inclined to pay the compensation. It took just under thirty days for them to pay the money. At that point they had had everything. They were completely wrong. It doesn't matter how much you argue with them.

SH. But you were treated badly as well. You know your stuff with working at the vets.

ET. Umm. I just think they need shaking up completely. I think it needs people running Defra that have actually had some connection to farming, so it's not a statistic as they said. They said the statistics show that this animal should have gone with TB. It was all statistics and forms.

SH. How do you feel about it all now, with hindsight?

ET. Absolutely sickened and I can see completely where some farmers come from who refuse a test. There's a couple in this area that have refused tests. I think they've even taken them to court, but I can sympathise with them because I said on that day, I didn't want them coming back and testing. They either opened me up or left me shut up. I was lucky that they opened me up straight away, because at the end of the day they (the cows) hadn't had TB.

SH. Do you think some farmers comply out of fear, because if you argue with them you are frightened of them never leaving you alone?

ET. Very much so. Basically, what they say, straight away, you're threatened with you'll lose your Single Farm Payment, so to me, have it, take it, if that's what you are going to threaten us with, take it! Until they can do the job right. Then they say if they've taken the SFP, they'll take you to court and fine you. A part of me thinks if there were some people strong enough or brave enough to do it, I would like to think you could turn the tables, so that you could take them to court and not them taking you.

SH. If you were in another walk of life, how they've treated you, you would be entitled to a huge amount of personal compensation.

ET. If it'd been the other way round, they would have come down on you like an absolute tonne of bricks.

SH. Have you got any other comments to say about TB?

ET. There's a few things. Now they've changed the rules, they put can restrictions on, if you've got an IR and it tests clear at the next test that its restricted to the farm that it's on at the time. I think that the farm should be allowed to choose to send that animal into slaughter. There's a lot of people that would send it into slaughter first as last and have done with it, see what happens. If it comes back TB clear, then you can move on rather than keeping an animal penned on its own for sixty days and then it probably ends up going that way anyway. It seems pointless. I think they're better being reactors than IRs and for your farm and for your other livestock. I think they're better to go as a reactor.

SH. It does seem psychologically cruel keeping a herd animal on its own, especially when for your Farm Assurance you're not supposed to keep a calf on its own, it's got to have friends; it's quite hypocritical.

ET. In every way. There's quite a few things are hypocritical.

SH. With working at the vets you see the other side of it, don't you?

ET. You see, a lot of people have got it into their heads that it's just the farmer that it affects, but I've seen vets in tears when they've failed a herd. They don't like doing it, they don't want to do it and for them I think it needs to be a better system.

SH. Well, they're quite stressed now because they are being monitored all the time.

ET. Yes, they have to make sure everything is clipped, measured and charted before it goes out of the crush and then again when you read it. A lot of the time they find it hard when a lump comes up; it could be a lump from an injection or a TB lump and there isn't much play in what you can do.

SH. I heard recently of a farm putting nearly 700 cattle through a test in the day outdoors in dreadful weather condition and the vets were starved and freezing cold. It's not an easy job, is it?

ET. And you've got to remember they didn't really go to university to do it, so as the farmer is frustrated, I'm sure they are as much frustrated.

SH. Even though it's a good paying number for them, isn't it?

ET. Not now. Probably, before I would imagine a lot of money has been made from it, but now you've got XL Farmcare that are running it, I think there's not the money in it at all and I think the only people that are winning are the government.

SH. I suppose in the past you could say that if a practise had got a good slice of TB money coming in, perhaps they could afford to do other general work to the farmers at a more cost-effective price, particularly in the very rural practises.

ET. Definitely.

SH. What are your long-term aspirations, your ambitions?

ET. I'd like to breed a bull or a heifer, a bull in particular and take it up to Stirling, but that's in a four-year area so it would get complicated, so it probably won't happen. I'd like to breed a champion in a sale at some point, that's my next goal.

SH. But TB issues are a threat to that.

ET. Nobody wants to buy from a one-year area, so you're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

SH. But if you could trust the test, you'd feel happier, whereas with all these false positives, that they keep denying.....

ET. I think that they should bring out a blood test or something. They can blood test for everything else, so they should be able to blood test for TB now.