

## Improving feed intake in cows, sheep and goats

*"Cows are not slot machines to put feed in and get milk and, subsequently, money out. They are sensitive individuals who show us strong signals that we should respond to." Christine Gosling is a dairy farmer from the UK. We met her at the Expo Milan, at a workshop on livestock where she told us about a specific observational technique which she has been testing, read the interview below:*



### Tell us a little but about you and your farm

My farm is Berkeley Farm Dairy, Wroughton, Wiltshire, UK. I farm with my husband, Nick and son, Edward. We converted to organic farming in 1997. We have 140 Guernsey cows and process our own milk. We supply an organic box company and local shops and restaurants with milk, cream and butter.

### You have been using an innovative observational technique, what is it?

**Obsalim** is an observational technique which was developed by a French vet Dr. Bruno Giboudeau. He recognised that a large number of feed-related symptoms in cows, sheep and goats can be interpreted as being an accurate reflection of the digestion of their ration. It is based on a series of symptom cards so that the farmer can make a primary diagnosis in the field of any potential problems or issues, and adjust the ration accordingly.

### How does it work?

There are 61 cards and you can have them in your pocket when observing the herd. You select the cards which correspond to the symptoms you have seen in the cows, line them up and use the 'correlation coefficients' to work out what you need to change in the feed intake.

The cards are divided into groups of symptoms: hair, skin, droppings, eyes, nose, feet etc. and also their food intake, milk-related issues and behaviour. A guide book, online tutorial and some software have also been created to support the farmer when using the cards.

Dr. Bruno Giboudeau developed the technique thanks to 15 years of trial and error, collating information and observing the animals. It was as if he had discovered the language of the rumen. I was introduced to Obsalim by my vet Edward De Beukelaer who has also translated the cards and guide book into English.

## How are you using this card system?

I am working on a **field lab** with a number of other dairy farmers entitled 'Can the use of observational techniques improve the results of the dairy herd' and we chose to concentrate on the Obsalim technique. Using observations of the eyes, hooves, skin, and other indicators, we are able to understand where the ration is failing and fine tune to ensure optimum feeding.

During the summer months, we learnt to recognise the symptoms by observing each other's herds. We started a trial of the method in November 2015 and are using the technique on each farm and recording the results.



First we evaluate the uniformity of the herd: their cleanliness, condition and their demeanour to see if there is scope for improvement. For example, if the back half of the cow is dirty, you know there is a problem with resting/lying space. The next step is to check for lick marks behind the shoulder which indicates a temporary drop in the rumen pH which affects rumination. We then look for variable cow pats which will show if there is inconsistency of access to the different types of food.

We then select the most prominent symptoms from at least three different areas of the body and find the appropriate cards from the pack. These cards are lined up and we calculate the totals of each criteria (fermentable energy, global energy, fermentable protein, global protein, fermentable fibre, structural fibre and rumen stability). The result will show where the ration is failing.

We then decide which part of the ration to change or what to change to improve the way the cows are feeding, or their feed or lying space. The guide book is very helpful at this stage.

## In what way has this system been useful for your farm?

The Obsalim system is such a useful addition to our herd management. It has resolved health problems and has increased the overall health and vitality of our herd. If we have made a mistake with our calculation of the ration, the cows soon tell us about it! In the autumn we assumed that the protein content in the leys had declined and we added a complementary feed with higher protein. After a few days we had some mastitis cases and I observed other very prominent symptoms which showed that they were eating far too much protein. Without applying the Obsalim observation system, we would not have realised this and the cows may have become ill.

The system can also help reduce food wastage and increase yields therefore increase profit.

The cards system has taught me to really observe my cows and to listen to what they are telling me about their ration. I feel much closer to them.

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## Could anyone use the cards?

If you work with cows, sheep or goats, yes! They exist in English, French, Spanish and Russian.

[www.berkeleyfarmdairy.co.uk](http://www.berkeleyfarmdairy.co.uk)  
[www.obsalim.com](http://www.obsalim.com)

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