

Understanding complementary and alternative medicine in UK dairy farming: farmer perspectives and practices

Crouch K, Cramer H, Rees G, Sharp D, Barrett D, Cabral C. What do complementary and alternative medicines mean to UK dairy farmers and how do they use them?
Frontiers in Veterinary Science, **12**. 2025

Synopsis

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) represents a diverse set of approaches, including homeopathy. Some farmers integrate CAM into their livestock management practices, yet little is known about exactly which CAM products and practices farmers use, or how such use might influence antibiotic prescribing. This qualitative study by Crouch and colleagues from the University of Bristol explored how UK dairy farmers conceptualise and utilise CAM on dairy farms.

The researchers followed qualitative research design methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 farmers across 20 dairy farms. Participants represented diverse management systems (15 organic, 9 conventional) and herd sizes (<100 to >200 dairy cows), spanning northeast England to mid-Wales. Ethnographic observations¹ were conducted on 17 farms, supplemented by fieldnotes and photographs. COVID-19 restrictions necessitated remote interviews for some participants. Topic guides explored farmers' CAM awareness, application methods, support networks and perceived outcomes. Analysis of the interviews took place by looking for recurring ideas and themes in the farmers' own words. Several researchers independently reviewed the material ensuring accuracy in capturing the farmers' perspectives.

Farmers conceptualised CAM as encompassing a remarkably diverse range of products and approaches, including herbal products (essential oils), food products (Manuka honey, apple cider vinegar), environmental enrichment (cow brushes, positive human-animal interactions), observational tools (robotic milking technology), homeopathic preparations, bioresonance services and distant healing. Every participating farmer either used or had experience with a specific herbal udder cream, seen as normal farming practice rather than medicine. Nine farmers used essential oils – some through the Soil Association's [RELACS project](#) investigating effects on antimicrobial use reduction.

Homeopathic products were used by 8/20 farmers to manage a wide range of veterinary health conditions. These farmers actively used homeopathy, valuing its complementary role to "fill the void" between identifying clinical signs and veterinary visits. The homeopathic approach used by some farmers emphasised individualised remedy selection based on

¹ 'The systematic observance and recording of people's behaviours, interactions, and cultural practices in their natural settings (a qualitative research method)'

animal personality, rather than disease-specific prescribing, encouraging whole-animal observation and promoting acute observation skills.

The findings of this study revealed that farmers conceptualise CAM broadly, encompassing not only traditional remedies like herbal treatments and homeopathy but also practices such as environmental enrichment, detailed animal observation and the use of certain food products and technologies. These CAM approaches are often integrated into a holistic farming ethos aimed at enhancing animal welfare and reducing reliance on antibiotics, highlighting the need for veterinary engagement to support responsible antimicrobial stewardship.

CAM use was strongly linked to organic farming and antibiotic-free milk production contracts. When farmers cannot use antibiotics, they need other options for animal care. As one farmer noted, restricted antibiotic access meant farmers had to "think outside the box". The Organic Milk Suppliers Cooperative, which manages 65% of UK organic milk supply and requires farmers to reduce or restrict antibiotic use, provides CAM training to support farmers in finding alternative solutions.

This well-conducted qualitative study employed multiple methods (semi-structured interviews and ethnographic farm observations), with systematic analysis achieving data saturation, ensuring credible and reliable findings. The diverse sample, spanning conventional and non-conventional systems across northeast England and mid-Wales, combined with rigorous coding processes and independent verification by multiple researchers, demonstrate a high quality methodological approach. While this geographic and operational diversity strengthens the study's insights into CAM use among UK dairy farmers, it represents specific regions rather than the full UK dairy sector. The study findings therefore provide valuable, transferable knowledge, whilst acknowledging that regional and system variations may exist.

These novel insights demonstrate that farmer interest in CAM in the UK warrants further consideration, particularly given potential contributions to responsible antimicrobial use reduction. More open stakeholder discussion on this topic could support collaborative animal health management incorporating safe, responsible CAM use, while also maintaining appropriate veterinary engagement.