

## What is the role of farm animal clinician?

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### Introduction

The change in roles for most farm animal clinicians from treating individual sick animals to working at a herd / flock preventive level has been obvious and widely recognised. Farm animal clinicians may also have roles as educators, facilitators, counsellors, advocates, researchers or even enforcers. These potential complex roles generate a) ethical questions: whose interests are clinicians working towards? b) practical questions: how do we better communicate to achieve these goals? and c) financial questions: How can veterinary practices derive income from these new roles? Given the information explosion, it seems impossible for vets to retain the reputation as the single authoritative source of animal health and welfare knowledge, perhaps clients primarily need support in synthesising and reviewing existing knowledge. Recent work has also highlighted the potential for valuing innovation and research undertaken by groups of farmers. In this context vets could have a role in supporting the production of practice-based evidence rather than simply disseminating evidence-based medicine.

### Veterinarians' role in promoting animal welfare

Veterinary surgeons could best be described as having a "patchy reputation" in animal welfare. Whilst the recent Vet Futures initiative highlights animal welfare as a major priority for the profession in the future, Philip Lowe in his report the role of farm animal clinicians reported that "*The roles, responsibilities and training of veterinarians in the welfare of farm animals are unclear*"<sup>1</sup>. In a report from the UK Veterinary development Council<sup>2</sup>, the link with the food industry was criticised where it was reported that "*Retailers saw the value of vets as advisers for very specific issues around animal welfare but were reporting inconsistencies in knowledge and ability to truly help farmers to add*".

Although recent surveys of the UK veterinary profession show that the public place a high degree of trust in the veterinary profession there is an inherent conflict between veterinary surgeons promoting clients or their patient's interests. Despite this encouraging assessment I have argued that the profession should work harder to deliver on a societal expectation for us to be animal welfare advocates and that it ought to introduce safeguards against profit-seeking influences on our clinical decisions. Acting as animal welfare advocates has been the focus of the BVA's 2016 Animal Welfare Strategy (British Veterinary Association 2016)<sup>3</sup>. Advocacy can work at several levels. Professional bodies can (and in my view should) be actively involved in advocating improving husbandry systems even if this conflicts with the interests of the farming community. On the other hand individual veterinary surgeons can (and should) provide husbandry advice to farmers operating within such system. Individual veterinary surgeons could (and should) use more sophisticated communication skills to promote the adoption of best practice.

### Veterinarians' role in generating evidence

Proceedings of AVA Annual Conference, Adelaide, 2016.  
Main, D - What is the role of farm animal clinician?

There has been much recent interest in the evidence-based veterinary medicine. The Vet Futures report <sup>4</sup> suggested that *"One of the fundamental drivers underpinning veterinary services may need to change – from a model driven by what vets are prepared to offer, to one that is driven by the needs and wants of existing and potential users of veterinary services. This means a move from service-led models to user-led approaches. It may also require changing the nature of the discourse between veterinary professionals and clients – from a hierarchical model with the vet as the expert imparting instruction, to one centred on partnership with empowered clients and other veterinary-related professionals."*

The easy access of information from the internet has clearly had an impact on the role of all professionals. Farm clients are more likely to be aware of existing best practice and more interested in evaluating the specific impact of changes in husbandry or introduction of technical innovations on their business. This has been recognised with European funding programmes. For example a farmer-led participatory approach is being advocated within the European Innovation Partnerships which are offering grant support to groups of farmers working together to solve specific problems. Bristol is leading an EU funded project, Hennovation, which is exploring the role of farmer-led groups in evaluating the impact of husbandry changes on injurious pecking in laying hens.

## References

British Veterinary Association (2016). Vets speaking up for animal welfare: BVA animal welfare strategy. BVA.

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1 Lowe P. Unlocking Potential: A Report on Veterinary Expertise In Food Animal Production. Defra London, UK. 2009

<sup>2</sup> Bennett R. Veterinary Development Council Report. BVA . London, UK 2012

<sup>3</sup> Wensley S. Developing a BVA Animal Welfare Strategy. Vet Rec 2015;176:27

<sup>4</sup> Anon. Taking Charge of Our Future: A Vision for the Veterinary Profession For 2030. London, BVA & RCVS. London, UK 2015

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