Is anyone awake?

‘Imagine a health service with no general practitioners. It’s unthinkable. But that is the grim prospect facing the UK livestock industry.’

‘A crisis of dramatic proportions is emerging in the countryside, leaving livestock farmers without access to one of their key support groups – vets.’

‘In an age when animal health is regularly tap of the mainstream news agenda, losing knowledgeable, reliable vets would be a disaster farmers and society can ill afford.’

THOSE comments cannot be dismissed as special pleading by the veterinary profession.

They appeared in last week’s issue of Farmers Weekly and formed the introduction to an editorial by the magazine’s livestock editor, Jonathan Long. The editorial drew attention to an article entitled ‘Vanishing vets’ which appeared in the same issue and discussed the results of a survey undertaken by the magazine among farm veterinary practices across the UK. The survey involved 200 veterinary practices, of which 88 replied. Farmers Weekly reports that nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) of the practices indicated that they intended to quit the sector within 10 years, and that only 14 per cent of the practices remaining intended to increase the number of vets they employed. It describes the loss of farm vets as ‘a major problem’ for UK livestock farmers, which could impact significantly on the industry’s ability to protect animal health and welfare. Concern at DEFRA’s failure fully to acknowledge the problem was forcefully expressed in the editorial’s headline: ‘DEFRA sleeplwalks into animal health disaster’ (Farmers Weekly, February 24, 2006, p 3; pp 22–25).

The BVA has been concerned about threats to the provision of farm animal veterinary services for some time, and it is interesting to see the problem being highlighted independently. As the BVA President, Dr Freda Scott-Park, commented last week, ‘The BVA has repeatedly spelt out to government the consequences of the declining number of experienced veterinary surgeons working in the rural community, as did the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRACom) report on vets and veterinary services published in 2003. While DEFRA has established a vets and veterinary services unit, the BVA remains concerned that there seems little appetite in government to listen to or act on the concerns expressed. Hopefully, the Farmers Weekly survey will help to concentrate minds.’

The problem is made all the more acute by the importance of veterinary practitioners to the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy (AHWS), on which a great deal of time and effort has been expended over the past three years and which is central to the Government’s vision for safeguarding and improving animal health and welfare in the UK. As the BVA President remarked, ‘The AHWS states that the veterinary surgeon should be the cornerstone of delivery of the strategy. There is, however, a very real risk that the number of farm animal vets remaining will be insufficient to deliver the vision of the strategy. Disease surveillance, animal health and animal welfare will all suffer as a consequence.’

Five years after the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, and with attention currently focused on avian influenza, the Government should not have to be reminded of the need to ensure that farm veterinary expertise continues to be available, both nationally and locally. At farm level, a veterinary input is necessary not just to prevent and deal with diseases affecting animals; farm vets also play a significant role in protecting public health and this will become more important with changing production methods and as new food safety legislation places greater emphasis on ensuring that only healthy animals enter the food chain (VR, November 26, 2005, vol 157, pp 688–689). The need for sufficient vets to fulfil these roles was recognised by the EFRACom in 2003. However, the committee’s concerns were largely dismissed by the Government, which still seems to believe that market forces will solve the problem and that ‘there is no evidence of market failure in the provision of private veterinary services’.

To an extent, the difficulties facing farm animal practice reflect the changes taking place in agriculture and the financial pressures on farmers. However, the consequences, as the BVA President pointed out, ‘are that disease surveillance and early identification of new and emerging diseases are compromised, with all the associated risks to public as well as animal health’. Veterinary farm health planning potentially represents a way out of the impasse and, importantly, will improve farm profitability as well as animal health. However, if health planning is ever to achieve what the AHWS requires of it, it needs to be adopted widely while the infrastructure necessary to support it is still in place. In this context, an initiative in Scotland is helpful, in that it gives farmers the option of receiving payments under the Single Payment Scheme in return for a commitment to develop an animal health and welfare programme in conjunction with their veterinary surgeon. South of the border, the availability of ‘pump-priming’ funds to develop initiatives to promote wider uptake of farm health planning may also prove helpful (see Letters, p 309 of this issue), but progress needs to be made soon. Nationally, a more structured approach is needed to ensure that veterinary surgeons are available and can contribute to health plans on every farm. The Farmers Weekly survey provides a reminder that the situation is serious. Alarm bells have been ringing for some time now; if DEFRA is sleepwalking, it’s time to wake up.
Is anyone awake?

Veterinary Record 2006 158: 281
doi: 10.1136/vr.158.9.281

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/158/9/281

Email alerting service

These include:
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/