So you want to be a cattle vet?

The UK’s two million dairy cows produce 14 billion litres of milk every year. Their milk is consumed by more than 95 per cent of the population every day in one form or another, and they contribute over 20 per cent of the entire agricultural output of the nation. They are precious indeed, and their health and welfare is paramount, says cattle vet Dick Sibley.

The dairy sector is the biggest employer of farm animal veterinary time, generating about £30 million of fee income for the profession each year. Beef cattle also require considerable veterinary input, but this is more localised and seasonal. Official Veterinarian work, mostly TB testing, creates another £20 million worth of work, but may diminish in the near future. If you want to get into cattle vetting in a big way, then dairy cows will provide you with a secure living and a rewarding career.

When I asked a group of dedicated and enthusiastic cattle vets in my own practice, ‘Why be a cattle vet?’, there was a variety of immediate responses. ‘Fun’, was the first and most common reply. It is fun, enjoyable and rewarding to work with animals that are biddable, productive, generally cooperative and very likeable. Cows are great. Their owners and keepers are similarly disposed in the majority of cases; it is unusual to find a cattle farmer who does not like and respect cows, and that makes working with them so much easier. We mostly work with willing clients who appreciate our involvement and want us to succeed.

The geographical distribution of cattle farms means that we work in some of the most attractive areas of the country, outside, and on our own.

Devon has been my home and workplace for 30 years, and I am still in awe of the views and countryside each and every day. When we walk the fields to reach our patients, we see views and wildlife that visitors would pay to see, and experience the countryside at its best.

We are frequently confronted with challenges; problems for which solutions have to be found using our skills, knowledge, ingenuity and common sense. The ‘fire brigade’ aspects of the work are still commonplace, with calvings, abdominal disasters and sick cows being a day-to-day occurrence in a busy cattle practice. While we have trained our more able clients to deal with most first aid situations, the demands for a higher level of technical ability increase, ensuring that we continually hone our skills and technical knowledge.

The value of the animals makes treatment worthwhile, and there is little resistance, for example, to techniques that involve surgical intervention; we commonly explore the abdominal cavities of cows, and will happily tackle most acute surgical conditions with little resistance from our clients.

The major attraction for many of us in cattle practice is the strategic approach to cattle health: the population medicine that ensures that health and disease are managed at herd level. This provides the biggest challenge, and the biggest gain. Here, the financial aspects of cattle farming become an important factor in planning for health, and the mutual understanding of the costs and benefits of health and production become part of the relationship between the farmer and vet.
The relationship with the client is a key component of cattle vetting. We see our farmers regularly and frequently, sometimes on a daily basis. We build trust and respect, which comes with experience and communication. It can be unfortunate that a new vet is judged on the first case, but cunning practice management will ensure that the first impression will be a good one. Many a new vet wins client approval by a professional calving, a polished dehorning or a slick castration. The judgement will be based on attitude, ability and handling skills. Vets with an empathy towards cattle and their keepers will gain more trust and respect than the technical experts.

... and downs
So, why not be a cattle vet? Well, it can be cold and wet. It can be mundane and dull, TB testing for six hours a day, or ‘recalling’ 100 cows on a cold winter morning, can seem an endless task. It can be physically demanding and draining working with heavy animals in less than ideal conditions. It can be mentally demanding solving difficult problems under pressure from demanding and worried clients whose livelihood will depend on your judgements.

The cattle vet world is becoming competitive; bigger practices chasing what appears to be a declining marketplace is creating an undesirable atmosphere in some areas. There is a danger that the cattle veterinary profession will degrade to a trade as price becomes a selling point. Although client loyalty is less reliable than it was in times gone by, most clients are more discerning than we think, and they will select a vet on service and delivery rather than the offer of trinkets or the price of mastitis tubes.

Commitment to the future
Vets considering a career in cattle vetting would be wise to select a practice that has a true commitment to the future. Attitude and infrastructure will determine the destiny of any cattle practice, and although size is not everything, any practice with fewer than three committed farm vets will struggle to offer a comprehensive service and support system for the new entrant. In the world of modern veterinary practices, it would be prudent to determine whether a practice offers a credible career structure as well as adequate support in what can be a challenging workplace. Structured out-of-hours working, time off and a realistic work/ life balance are now the norm in most modern cattle practices, and although salaries may be less than can be expected in companion animal work, the rewards make up for it. And there are no evening surgeries!

If you like cows, farmers and the countryside, and have the enthusiasm and belief in being part of an industry that converts air, sunshine and water into milk and meat, then there will always be a place for you in cattle practice.

Ten-minute chat
Daniel Mills is professor of veterinary behavioural medicine at the University of Lincoln, where he leads the Masters course in clinical animal behaviour and an international research group examining companion animal behaviour and welfare.

What took you into behavioural medicine?
Great lectures on behaviour and welfare at vet school by Professor Christine Nicol that really made me think (I don’t enjoy rote learning). One evening I went to an open lecture by Professor Sir Robert Hinde on the interdependence of the behaviour sciences. After this lecture (not realising how eminent he was), I wrote him a rather naive letter about how much I enjoyed his lecture, and my interest in behaviour. After asking if he had any ideas what I could do as a vet. He sent a lovely handwritten four-page reply, which has inspired me ever since, together with his generosity.

How did you get to where you are today?
A passion for my subject, and a lot of good luck. I think I happened to be in the right place at the right time. What was formerly Lincolnshire College of Agriculture validated the UK’s first degree in equine science, and they were told they needed two additional staff: one to teach behaviour, the other equine health. So the principal at the time decided to go for the two-for-one option and advertised a post for a vet with an interest in behaviour. When the college became part of De Montfort University (later becoming part of Lincoln university in 2001), I convinced them there was a need to develop animal behaviour and welfare programmes at undergraduate level.

My veterinary degree gives me a great platform for interdisciplinary research, as I know a little about the specialisms of my colleagues and can sometimes bring together new collaborations and delve into areas I would never be able to alone.

Describe some of the activities that your job involves you in.
As it is important to keep in touch with the reality of my work, I still see clinical cases, and I use this material in my lectures. I particularly enjoy teaching on our new Masters because the sessions are so interactive, and we try to translate theory into practice using an evidence-based approach. I spend a lot of time associated with my research. The buzz you get from finding out something new is addictive, even if you do sometimes find that someone else has got there first. It’s also great to see projects develop to the point of producing something new and of real practical value that we can have confidence in, like the use of mirrors to help horses kept in isolation.

What do you like about your job?
I love the mix of teaching, research and consultancy, and being in a department of biological sciences, which encourages interdisciplinary collaboration. I also enjoy giving opportunities to others (as others have given me), and seeing individuals develop their potential.

What do you not like?
Not having enough hours in the day to do everything I would like to, and government cuts in investment in higher education and research. I also find it sad when I see politicians, the media or others misrepresent something of animal welfare importance and do not seem interested in science. I think we shouldn’t be afraid of the truth even if it is unpleasant at times.

Why is your job important?
Our relationship with animals is an intrinsic part of our society, and we don’t make as much use of this to improve things as we could.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
Go for it and believe in yourself. Remember, it’s a lifestyle choice: you may not get rich, but you can have a lot of fun.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
See practice with as many different people as possible: good or bad, you’ll learn something from them. This advice was given to me by Roger Mugford when I saw practice with him as a student.

What was your proudest moment?
Other than my marriage and the birth of my children, it is either the success of the first international veterinary behaviour meeting, which I helped to set up, or being asked to give the retirement address at Cornell University for Professor Houpt, who has been an inspiration to so many in the field.
Ten-minute chat

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