PAPER

Opinions and practices of veterinarians and dairy farmers towards herd health management in the UK

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Context

Despite the move towards preventive management in the farm animal industry, currently there is modest evidence of the active implementation of herd health and production management (HH&PM) on farms. The objective of this study was to compare farm animal veterinarians’ and dairy farmers’ opinions on herd health plans and HH&PM with the aim of discovering and better understanding differences in the opinions of veterinarians and farmers.

Main conclusion

Veterinarian and farmer respondents differed when listing what they considered to be the ‘major roles’ of veterinarians on the farm; although veterinarians saw ‘Being an independent advisor’ as important, this did not seem to be perceived as such by the farmers. Furthermore, when presenting themselves to clients, the veterinarians seemed to favour a ‘friend of the farmer’ style approach, but a much smaller proportion of the farmers seemed to prefer this approach. The study underlines that ‘demonstrating cost effectiveness’ of HH&PM is still a main concern for both veterinarians and farmers.

Approach and results

Two complementary paper-based questionnaires, one for farm animal veterinarians and one for dairy farmers, were distributed to 436 dairy farmers and 160 veterinary practices across the UK between June and September 2006.

When asked ‘What is the major role of the veterinarian on farm?’, 69 per cent of veterinarians saw their major role as ‘Optimising milk production’. Fourteen per cent of veterinarians specified their major role as being in the ‘Other’ category, which could be summarised as ‘a trusted independent advisor who can coordinate input from other advisors’ (Fig 1). Three viewpoints were investigated with regard to the veterinarian’s approach to the farm: the most significant difference in response showed 66 per cent of veterinarians using a ‘personal, friend of the farmer style’ approach but only 30 per cent of farmers preferring this approach. Twenty-six per cent of the veterinarians (33 of 125) believed they initiated discussions on recurring topics such as mastitis control and fertility. Fifteen per cent of the farmers (18 of 121) considered it was the veterinarian who instigated these discussions with their veterinarian, and it is apparent from the farmer respondents (81 per cent) highly valued the discussions with their veterinarian, and it is apparent from the relatively small proportion of veterinarians who indicated that they instigated a discussion that there is opportunity for a more proactive approach by veterinarians.

The results suggest that finance is not always the main driver of HH&PM and focusing on more than cost alone is important to consider when initiating change on farm. It was unexpected that ‘Time’ was ranked above finance-related issues as the main disadvantage of HH&PM for both veterinarians and farmers. It seems important to explore a more time-efficient application of HH&PM to offset this disadvantage.

A limitation of this study is lack of knowledge whether the responses are a true representation of current practice. However, the questionnaire was anonymous and the farmers and veterinarians were not selected in combination, so there is no obvious reason why the respondents would not give honest answers. The independent selection of veterinarians and farmers does limit interpretation when comparing the veterinarians’ and farmers’ responses.

Significance of findings

This study presents new information and identifies clear tendencies that can be used to better assist farmers when implementing HH&PM. Veterinarians are important stakeholders to motivate change on dairy farms, and the results of this study identify areas that could be improved by more training of veterinarians and effective communication.

FIG 1: Frequency distribution of veterinarians’ and farmers’ response to the question ‘As a veterinarian on dairy farms, what do you see as your major role?’ ‘The veterinarian on my farm plays a major role in . . .’

Veterinarians (n=125) Farmers (n=121)

- Decreasing overall costs
- Disease control
- Supporting animal welfare
- Quality of farm life
- Optimising milk production
- Other

Response (%) 100 80 60 40 20 0
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