Farmers’ perception of the role of veterinary surgeons in vaccination strategies on British dairy farms

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Context
There are no prescriptive guidelines or schedules stating which vaccines should be used by cattle farmers in Britain. This is in contrast to human and companion animal medicine where vaccine schedules are available for use by practitioners, patients and owners. There are also no compulsory vaccination strategies in Britain; therefore, decision-making responsibility rests with the farmer. This decision-making process is often facilitated by a veterinary surgeon. The importance of the vet-farmer relationship and the vet as an information source has been well described in previous literature. A detailed understanding of this relationship is important to optimise vaccination strategies by, for example, tailoring advice to farmers. This study aimed to describe how British dairy farmers perceive the role of vets in the implementation of vaccination strategies on farms.

Main conclusion
This study provides evidence that vets have an important role in facilitating farmer decision-making in all aspects of vaccination on farm including vaccine distribution and advice on implementation. This role is acknowledged both by farmers with regular veterinary contact and those with solely emergency veterinary contact.

Approach
Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with farmers recruited from a database held by the British dairy levy board (AHDB Dairy). Recruitment using maximum variation sampling to include a diversity of farmers and farming types was continued until data saturation was reached. Twenty-four interviews were carried out. Anonymised transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results
Analysis revealed two distinct roles for the vet as perceived by the farmer. The first was as a pharmacist and a fire fighter (fire fighter) such as for emergency work that the farmer was unable to deal with themselves. Second was the vet as a preventative and herd health practitioner, including regular visits for routine fertility work and preventative healthcare. In either case, farmers reported that they would go to their vet for advice on vaccination.

The analysis also identified five key responsibilities for the vet in relation to vaccination:
1. Identification of ‘a problem’;
2. Diagnosing the problem;
3. Advising to vaccinate;
4. Provider of the vaccine;
5. Advising on implementation.

Interpretation
The results confirm that vets are perceived as major facilitators for vaccination on British dairy farms, regardless of their main role on the farm. Generally, the use of vaccines was in reaction to a problem diagnosed by the vet. This would suggest that a proactive approach, with vets initiating discussion around vaccine preventable diseases, may optimise vaccination strategies on-farm. However, these results also suggest that vaccination decision-making is a process and not just a one-off event. The identification of a problem was the key initial trigger, in both fire fighting and disease surveillance roles, but the role of the vet did not stop there.

Overall, the farmers perceived they had a good relationship with their vets, using the term ‘my vet’ to distinguish them from other vets. One key reason why farmers place importance on their vet’s advice was their perceived knowledge of local disease epidemiology. While it is positive to find that veterinary advice was perceived to be trustworthy, a change in the perception of veterinary work appears to be required in the dairy farming industry. There was a perception that increased veterinary contact and veterinary bills are a proxy for poor herd health. Although emergency veterinary work will always be required, a shift to the integration of vets into the farm team could facilitate a change in spending from veterinary medicines to veterinary advice and preventative care.

Not all themes were evident in all interviews. This, together with the findings about ‘my vet’, could be interpreted as evidence for the need for an individualised veterinary approach. Promoting or enhancing the individual vet-farmer relationship would therefore enable farmers to have a single point of contact and allow the vet to tailor their advice to the farm.

Significance of findings
This study collected a broad range of perspectives using a method that allowed the collection of rich and detailed data, but is not necessarily representative for the whole British dairy farming population. This qualitative study should motivate further work, including the investigation of other stakeholders’ perspectives, with an aim to optimise the use of vaccines in the British dairy industry.
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