

PAPER

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

J. Hall, W. Wapenaar

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J. Hall,
St David's Farm
Practice, Exmouth, UK
W. Wapenaar,
School of Veterinary
Medicine and
Science, University of
Nottingham, UK

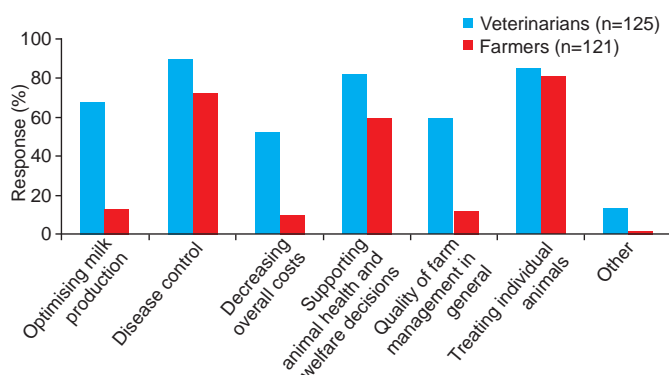
Correspondence to
Dr Wapenaar, e-mail:
wendela.wapenaar@
nottingham.ac.uk

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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 ...'



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 2008.

When asked 'What is the major role of the veterinarian on farm?', 68 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' 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 initiated these discussions, and 41 per cent of farmers (50 of 121) thought they instigated discussions themselves. These discussions

were perceived as valuable by 78 per cent of veterinarians (97 of 124) and 81 per cent of farmers (98 of 121).

Thirty per cent of the veterinarians (37 of 123) estimated that more than half of their dairy clients participated in HH&PM. When asked 'What are the three main advantages for farmers in participating in HH&PM?', 40 per cent of veterinarians (v 27 per cent of the farmers) reported that a major advantage was to improve farm economics. When asked 'What are the three major disadvantages that you see in participating in HH&PM?', 51 per cent of veterinarians and 59 per cent of farmers stated 'Time' as the major disadvantage. Eighty-two per cent of the farmers (98 of 119) stated they knew enough to make an informed choice about implementation of HH&PM on their farm. However, only 32 per cent of veterinarians (39 of 122) believed their clients knew enough about HH&PM to make an informed choice.

Interpretation

The veterinarians' and farmers' responses differed when listing the major roles of the veterinarian on farm. The role of independent coordinator/advisor may need to be emphasised to farmers. While veterinarians perceive that a range of topics recur during their farm visits, adequately representing the holistic approach of herd health management, the farmers' frequency of discussed topics was lower overall and some areas were only rarely mentioned. It is possible that although veterinarians truly discuss the range of topics they suggested, the timing and method of this communication may not be effective. The majority of 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.