

# The future of cattle veterinary practice: insights from a qualitative study

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## Introduction

Both the dairy farming industry and the veterinary profession in the UK are changing.

As a result of increasing milk yields, increasing herd sizes and better business planning, UK dairy farmers have increased their production efficiency in recent years. However, this presents new challenges for farm vets and has shifted the focus within the profession from traditional emergency work to herd health planning. There are also changes to the business landscape of veterinary practice, with an increase in corporate business structures and increasing downward pressure on medicine sales.

These changes are likely to impact on the future role of veterinary surgeons working in cattle practice and the skill set they will need to carry out their work effectively. As such, the aim of this study was to explore the future role of the cattle vet in the UK.

## Approach

A series of semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with key opinion leaders in the cattle veterinary (n=7) and farming (n=5) sectors. Selective sampling was used to identify participants that were most likely to have the necessary insight into the relevant issues.

Following transcription of the interviews, thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the responses. A deductive approach was used, applying a priori codes formed during literature review and development of the research questions. In addition to these a priori codes, initial codes were also identified

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## KEY FINDINGS

- This study reveals that the role of the cattle veterinary practitioner in the UK is changing. Going forward, there will be an increasing need for data handling and analysis skills, people management and training and a more collaborative approach with other professionals.

using inductive analysis. Following an iterative analytical process, a mind map was constructed to illustrate the key themes identified during the interview process.

## Results

The study identified that the role of the cattle veterinary practitioner in the UK is changing. Key themes identified were changing business structures, an increased need for collaboration, a changing vet-farmer relationship, the changing nature of veterinary practice income streams, the changing role of the vet and the changing needs and expectations of the new generation of veterinary graduates (Fig 1). Within these themes, an increasing focus on

data handling, people management and advisory skills was highlighted.

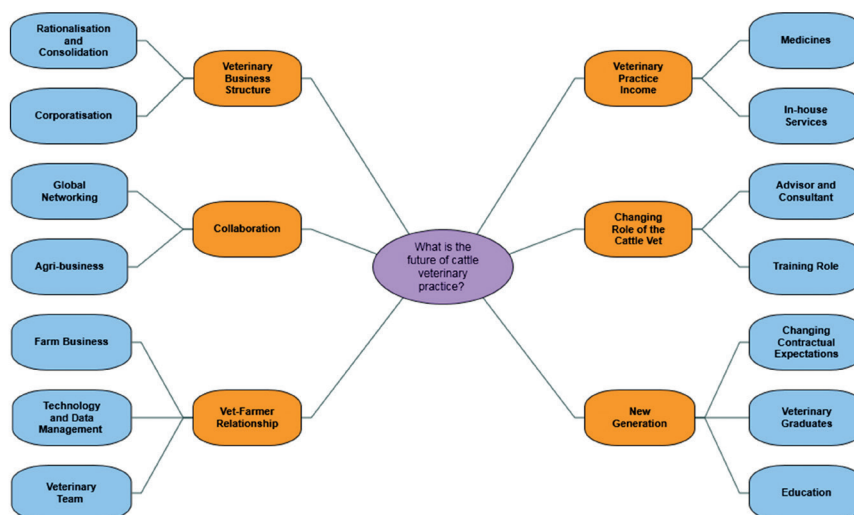
## Interpretation

The results indicated that the role of the cattle vet is expected to move towards an advisory and training position, with the interviewees identifying an increasing need to develop consultancy and data-driven services.

However, it should be noted that these findings represent only the themes identified by experienced leaders in the veterinary and cattle farming sectors. As such, they may not be representative of the whole profession. Further studies that include a wider cross-section of the profession would, therefore, be of value.

## Significance of findings

It is clear from the results of this study and the related literature that the direction in which the cattle veterinary profession is heading will inevitably require a skill set different from that of today's cattle vets. It is important that these findings are considered in the development of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, to ensure the profession continues to adapt alongside the changing cattle industry.



**Fig 1: Mind map representing the key themes (orange) and sub-themes (blue) that emerged from the interviews regarding the future of cattle veterinary practice**