

‘The wind always blows in from the west’: how the UK is leading the way with telemedicine

By Josh Loeb

THE UK leads Europe in terms of the breadth of veterinary telemedicine services that are now permitted.

That is the view of Rens van Dobbenburgh, president of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE).

Speaking during a BVA webinar on 31 May, which focused on the coronavirus situation across Europe, he described what had happened in the UK as ‘exceptional’.

No veterinary regulator in Europe has gone as far as the RCVS in allowing remote consultation and remote prescribing to take place, even temporarily as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, he said.

This, he explained, was ‘remarkable’ because it was not in line with FVE expectations.

‘At the FVE, we expected Covid-19 to boost telemedicine,’ he said. ‘However, most countries only use telemedicine up to the level of triage – so not for diagnosis and not for prescribing. The UK is almost the only exception.’

In March, the RCVS gave the go ahead for vets to prescribe veterinary medicines remotely if the situation required it during the pandemic (VR, 28 March 2020, vol 186, p 364).

Previously the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct did not allow veterinary surgeons to prescribe prescription-only veterinary medicines (POM-Vs) without a physical examination of the animal(s) having first taken place. However, the RCVS council decided that there should be a temporary departure from this position because of the need to limit contact between people, including vets and their clients, during the pandemic. This temporary measure is due to be reviewed at the end of June.

Recent RCVS surveys have found that 90 per cent of vets

are practising remote consulting and 70 per cent are using it for both existing and new clients since lockdown after the RCVS temporarily relaxed these rules.

According to van Dobbenburgh, no other European veterinary regulator has made a similar move. The only one that comes close is the *Générale de l’Enseignement et de la Recherche* in France, where changes designed to temporarily allow more telemedicine services to be offered are only being planned for and have not yet taken effect.

Asked why the UK led the pack, van Dobbenburgh said he could only speculate. But he added that it was not uncommon for changes to occur first in the UK before cascading across the rest of Europe.

‘It sometimes seems that new developments in the veterinary profession come in from the west,’ he said. ‘The wind always blows in from the west. This is also the case with practice management, with the vet being in a free market, with veterinary insurance, with veterinary specialists and so on.’

‘So maybe it’s the case that the UK is more likely to, let’s say, accept new ways of being a veterinarian, of making diagnoses, of prescribing and so on.’

‘I don’t know [if that’s the reason]...but we know that this process of development from west to east exists.’

The FVE is currently in the process of drafting a ‘very, very important’ paper on telemedicine, van Dobbenburgh said.

He added: ‘Telemedicine is an important topic for all of us because we can see that it’s the direction [of travel] – I think nobody would deny that – but the route to that direction, or the route to that situation, is, I think, longer than we expected.’

However, he said some attitudes of UK vets were surprising –

although the UK is leading the way as far as remote consultations and remote prescribing are concerned, relatively few UK vets expect to continue to provide such services after the pandemic abates.

To illustrate his point he showed a graph compiled using data gathered by veterinary market research company CM

Research. It showed that just 9 per cent of UK vets said they were ‘very likely’ to continue carrying out remote consultations and remote prescribing in future – a much lower proportion than in France, despite the fact that telemedicine is used to a much lower degree in France than in the UK at present.

‘This is quite remarkable,’ he said. ‘We had expected that in a country where this is used most, like in the UK, this also would be a boost for using afterwards...If you look to France, which so far has no experience with it, there’s a much bigger proportion of colleagues there who think they’ll keep on using it after Covid-19.’

Similarly, the proportion of vets in Italy and Spain who said they thought they were very likely to continue using these forms of telemedicine in future was much higher than in the UK, despite the fact that none use them at the moment.

‘This is quite a remarkable result and we have to work to understand it better,’ he said. ●



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