Editorial

Promising signs for tackling bovine TB

FOR too long, progress on managing bovine TB (bTB) in the UK has been hamstrung by polarised and simplistic debate.

Badger culling has been at the centre, often overshadowing the extensive efforts of vets and animal keepers to tackle infection in cattle.

But, as this editorial has argued before, there is a need to dignify the challenge of dealing with such a complex and stubborn disease with detailed consideration, collaboration and a more nuanced approach.

There are promising signs that this is now happening. One of them is in the form of a policy position paper on the disease by the BVA – 72 pages long with 35 recommendations for change (pp 84–85).

Communication with farmers should be simplified to remove industry confusion, it says. There also needs to be better data sharing between government vets and private vets to optimise communication and planning with farmers.

Some areas of research and development must be prioritised, the paper argues, for example, developing a DIVA (Differentiating Infected from Vaccinated Animals) test for use alongside a cattle vaccine. The government should also fund and continue to roll-out the interferon gamma test as a more sensitive supplement to the standard skin test and explore its potential for wider use as part of the testing regime. It must also assess the potential of other tests.

The paper recognises the need for a wider shift in focus to examine the role played in disease spread by other wildlife (not just badgers) and other livestock (not just cattle) as well as by different farming interventions – there is a need to examine the impact of finishing units, for example, as well as the risk associated with slurry.

And it also recognises that human factors are important to address when tackling this disease. Farmers’ actions and choices play a substantial role in determining how livestock diseases spread so more needs to be done to influence their management.

To drive this, the compensation regime should be adjusted so farmers are paid according to a system of ‘earned recognition’ based on their past performance, biosecurity measures and local disease risk.

The whole approach to managing bTB needs to shift from the negative or ‘loss messaging’ to the positive ‘gain messaging’, says the BVA.

James Russell, cattle vet and BVA’s junior vice president, describes the ‘learned helplessness’ that vets and farmers often share in tackling this disease on page 121. They need to feel empowered to bring customised solutions. This shift in thinking has begun, but it requires tangible support. That should come in three forms, says the BVA: clear evidence and advice, reliable and accessible local data, and incentivising best practice.

Angela Cassidy, an academic with a background in both zoology and psychology, has tracked the bTB debate over the years. Her assessment is that, intellectually, the debate on bTB had got ‘stuck’ but recently it has become less fractious and she welcomes this shift (p 84).

So the timing of BVA’s paper is good, landing as it does when there is a sense of tentative optimism and signs of a possible way forward for managing this disease.

The bTB review led by Charles Godfray and Defra’s response to it deserve credit for their contribution to this shift. But there are also other technological innovations on the horizon that drive the promise of hope. A number of potential new tests could bring more accurate diagnosis via blood and even milk sampling, and, in the long term, genetics offers the promise of farms being able to breed cattle with a reduced susceptibility to bTB.

If the BVA’s paper is rather long and complex, perhaps that is no bad thing – for it is an acknowledgement that this is an issue where to simplify is to fail. It is welcome that that space is being opened up for broader intellectual inquiry about bTB that moves us beyond merely seeing everything through very restrictive – and unhelpful – prisms. And it is good for cattle vets that they can start to bring the message of change and hope to farmers.

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