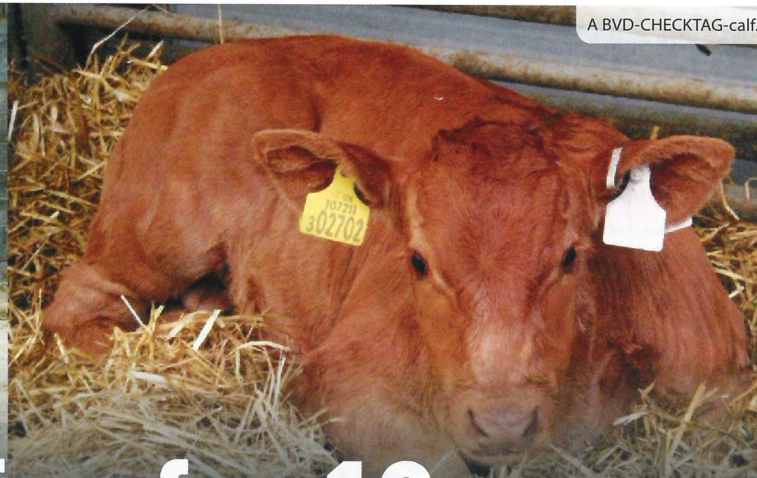


FarmSkills foot trimming: XLVets member practices support farmers through this scheme.



A BVD-CHECKTAG-calf.



XLVets: collaborating for 10 years

THIS year marks the 10th anniversary of XLVets, a community of independent veterinary practices across the UK.

Over the past decade, XLVets has aimed to help its member practices generate sustainable competitive advantages in a changing industry and achieve “excellence in practice” – from meeting the clinical needs of patients and providing the best environments for staff to work in, to increasing profitability.

In the beginning

The foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks in 2001 and 2007 had a major impact on farm-

ing in some parts of the UK, while the RCVS decision to relax the ruling on practice ownership was also having an effect. By the turn of the millennium, non-vets were entering the market as practice owners, often with a lot of commercial expertise behind them. This also proved to be an open door for large corporations to set

up veterinary franchises and multiple branches nationwide.

In 2005, a group of like-minded, independent vet practice partners decided to join forces and XLVet UK was formed.

Founding member and managing director David Black, a veterinary surgeon and managing director of Paragon Veterinary Group in Dalston,

Cumbria, said the XLVets model allowed practices to work more closely together.

“A different breed of practice owner had started to appear – people with a lot of business experience who benefited from economies of scale on supplies, and adopted a more professional approach to staff recruitment, training and facilities.

“But back then, as independent practices, we were spending a lot of time doing the same non-vet activities – car leasing, telephone systems, newsletters, HR issues, health and safety and so on. By creating the XLVets

organisation, we could now share our skills and ideas with like-minded and progressive practices, and pool our resources to improve our business processes, as well as our buying power.”

The concept spread

At XLVets’ first annual meeting, there were 20 member practices. Today, there are 52, while specialist division XLEquine was launched in 2012 – XLEquine has 32 member practices and more than 120 equine vets.

The small animal element of XLVets has also been recognised as a specific sector and developed its own brand iden-

tity – XL Excellence in Veterinary Care launched at the London Vet Show in 2014. There are 45 small animal practices within XLVets, with more than 250 vets across the group.

XLVets started with a group of like-minded large animal vets, but the new focus on equine and small animal looks to increase the number of member practices further.

Andrew Curwen, XLVets chief executive, added: “XLVets provides leadership and support to its member practices – it generates tools, opportunities and environments to help ensure the growth and success of the

RACHEL QUEENBOROUGH

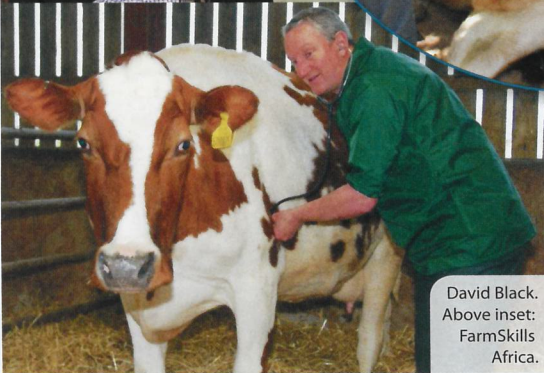
PR consultant and freelance technical writer

looks at the rise of XLVets and how it has developed, as the group celebrates its 10-year anniversary

Andrew Curwen.



IMAGE: Paul Rogers.

David Black.
Above inset:
FarmSkills
Africa.

⇒ continued from page 24

individual practice, so they can achieve excellence in practice. It helps give them the choice and the freedom to be business owners."

The concept of an organisation that supports independent businesses has also attracted

interest from overseas.

"A few years ago, we were approached by a group of Irish vets from independent practices wanting to enjoy the benefits of collaboration and the support of an organisation," Mr Black explained. "So there's now an XLVets Ireland with 22 practices in it, and a similar set-up in New Zealand with seven group practices."

Support

Mr Curwen said: "XLVets was at the start – and continues to be – a marketing group. Unlike the typical behaviour of buying groups, we are looking to collaborate and work together to create long-term partnerships. It's not just about getting a cheaper deal."

This is exemplified in a series of initiatives to help

practices grow. The BVD CHECK TAG campaign aims to get cattle that have tested BVD-free registered on to an online database. XLVets built the database and created a website and support materials for vets to help educate farmers to ensure they buy BVD-free cattle. It's an approach that won XLVets the Practice Marketing Award at the Veterinary Marketing Awards 2015.

In addition, the XLEquine Foot Care Campaign encourages equine vets to work with local farriers to educate horse owners and reduce the incidence of lameness.

More recently, a series of training courses has been developed for horse owners (EquineSkills) and a range of pet courses (Pet Skills) are also planned. Under the FarmSkills banner, XLVets

Veterinary TIMES

Amid the corporatisation of the profession, independence is an alternative and viable option.

XLVets practices in each of the five regions in England worked together, along with non-XLVets practices, and each group formed a regional company that successfully bid for the delivery contracts.

Mr Curwen said the support XLVets was able to offer was key to its success: "Membership of XLVets provided a foundation for these practices to be able to build a level of trust and collaborative spirit that then empowered them to achieve success."

member practices also provide support to farmers. Practice staff need further training too – both in clinical practices and business management, leading to the creation of the VetSkills programme, which includes courses for receptionists, farm support staff, new graduate vets, first line managers, veterinary technicians and business owners.

Collaboration – at home and overseas

For a number of years XLVets has been collaborating with animal health organisations overseas. In 2010, it became involved with a project in Mozambique to reintroduce dairy cows to the Manica region of the country, with the aim of restoring a dairy industry that was destroyed in the civil war.

The FarmSkills Africa project is now in its final year. Vets from XLVets practices have provided training for smallholders and the para-vets who provide most of the veterinary support in the region. Following the success of FarmSkills Africa, a similar project has been set up in The Gambia. With more than 50 practices nationwide, the group makes the most of the opportunity to improve on accepted best practice.

A clinical audit is underway to evaluate the success rates of different caesarean techniques in cattle and more than 300 vets from the community have submitted information on more than 3,000 caesarean cases.

Another initiative is investigating the use of antimicrobials, with the aim of reducing antibiotic usage on farms, while XLEquine is also conducting a clinical audit into equine castration to determine best practice protocols.

As independent practices, XLVets members face similar challenges and many have joined forces for their mutual benefit over the past 10 years. Examples include the recent TB tender when

A changing industry

Over the past nine years, the number of vet practices has risen by 38 per cent, largely due to an increase in small animal practices, while mixed practices have decreased in number.

The growth of self-employed para-professionals in the farming industry, such as foot-trimmers, has led to XLVets helping its members create their own farm animal technicians, and it has devised a Vet-Tech programme to ensure excellence in practice can be recognised for all members of the on-farm team.

Mr Curwen said: "Over the past few years, there have also been some significant changes occurring at practice level as a result of an increasing globalisation of the veterinary marketplace.

"Independent veterinary businesses need to understand and embrace these changes, if they are to be successful, rather than allow themselves to become victims of market forces beyond their control."

With succession planning becoming an increasing problem for many independent practices as they grow and become larger companies, Mr Black believes there will be an increasing need for alternative business structures that facilitate practice ownership.

He said: "Over the next 10 years there will be further changes and challenges ahead for veterinary practice owners.

"Amid the corporatisation of the profession, independence is an alternative and viable option. And, as an organisation, XLVets is looking ahead at how we can support our member practices through providing them with the tools, skills and confidence to stay independent.

"In a changing industry, it is forward-thinking independent businesses that will have the advantage of being light-footed enough to meet the challenges ahead."