

+ BCVA's incoming and outgoing presidents reflect on the challenges facing the association – pages 2 and 3

+ Owen Atkinson on rumen health and sub-acute rumen acidosis – page 4

+ How New Zealand's dairy industry tackles managing reproductive success – page 6

+ Lecture programme and the congress commercial exhibition – pages 10 and 11



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Cattle vets at heart of food security drive

IT could never be said the life of a cattle vet was a bed of roses.

Long hours, tough working conditions and the often conflicting demands of an increasingly intensive on-farm environment, mean it's always been a special breed of men and women who leave vet school and head straight for the nearest large animal practice.

But it can be argued that since the foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak of 2001, economic and epidemiological pressures have been bearing down on the sector with an intensity not experienced before.

The cattle industry has not escaped the effects of a prolonged recession, while a smorgasbord of endemic diseases continues to assail the national herd. Bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) and John's disease remain stubbornly persistent while the resurgence of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is estimated to have cost British taxpayers as much as £500m over the past 10 years.

Feeling the strain

Throw in the threat of European action over medicine use in the farming sector and the ever-present risk posed by the next emerging disease and it's understandable if vets have been feeling the strain. "It may be an overused term, but the pressures that seem to be currently descending on the UK cattle industry,

"The pressures currently descending on the UK cattle industry, and with it the cattle veterinary profession, have been described as the 'perfect storm'..."



Jonathan Statham

and with it the cattle veterinary profession, have been described as the 'perfect storm,' said outgoing BCVA president Jonathan Statham.

"New emerging disease threats, such as the vector-borne diseases bluetongue and Schmallenberg virus, sit alongside the ever-present risk of reintroduction of FMD from the east. Yet we don't seem to have gained control of the old challenges, with bovine TB stubbornly refusing to yield and mainland Europe (and Scotland and Ireland) forging ahead of England on control of endemic disease such as BVD and bovine herpesvirus 1 (BHV-1)."

Mr Statham went on to explain how economic pressures have also played their part: "Our cattle industry faces these issues against a backdrop of uncertain recovery from recession with severe financial hardship at home and globally. This continues to inhibit potential rises in the price of food that might help compensate for the spiralling costs of livestock food production including labour, fuel, fertiliser and feed costs.

"The veterinary profession faces these issues against a backdrop of declining farm numbers, internet-based threats to medicines sales and Treasury-driven decline in state veterinary services. The current official veterinarian procurement process has been in play for around two years and much uncertainty still exists

over how much impact this may have on fee income streams in cattle practice, especially those to the west who stand in the front line against the spread of bTB.

"Expanding output from university veterinary schools potentially oversupplies a static or shrinking cattle veterinary job market for indebted graduates," he added.

Opportunity

However, despite – and also because – of these challenges, prospects for cattle veterinary surgeons remain strong.

"Sustainable food production is increasingly on the agenda of global government," Mr Statham said.

"Feeding a growing world population without compromising the environment in which we live is an opportunity for the cattle industry and cattle veterinary surgeons alike. The value of food is becoming more appreciated once again as realisation dawns that even modern farming methods may struggle to provide genuine food security.

"Cattle farming represents a dynamic and flexible source of food – both dairy and beef – with a massive contribution to make all around the world in supply of protein, energy and minerals. Compromised health and reproductive performance will inhibit the development of livestock farming, and veterinary input is essential at the hub of this process."

Emerging needs

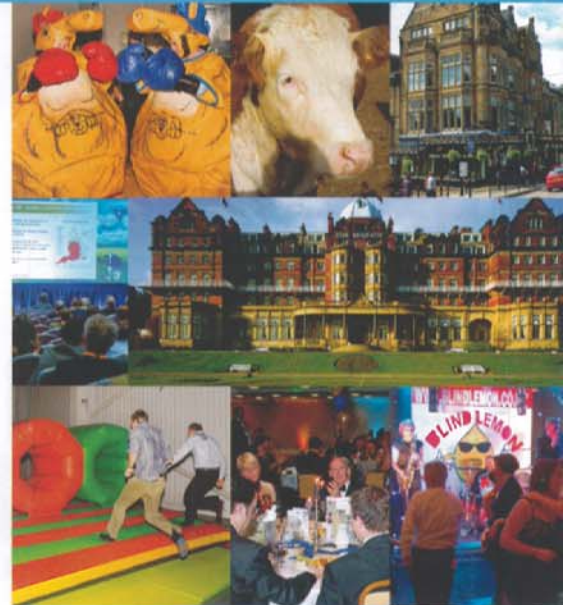
Despite the challenges, a new generation of cattle veterinary graduates is seizing the opportunities presented with the expertise and will to evolve to service the emerging needs of a new cattle industry.

That doesn't mean, however, there is no longer a place for the values that have served the sector so well. Mr Statham said: "We do not need to simultaneously discard all values of the past – some of those values of hard work and good service are just as valued by our farm clients now as ever.

"There are so many areas of our industry that will benefit from veterinary input, such as closer connection of farm-to-fork food supply and the need for veterinary delivered knowledge exchange. A genuine working partnership with the state veterinary service is critical and progress is being made on fresh ways of working. Progress is being made in the control of endemic diseases with a national programme for BVD and campaigns to improve both mastitis and lameness.

"Responsible use of antimicrobials requires veterinary stewardship, but we still need veterinary medicines to protect animal welfare as well as our food supply. New techniques and technologies are being discovered and veterinary scientists and veterinary advisors are in the right place to manage the health of the cattle herd as a key part of the farm team of the future."

One of those charged with ensuring the next generation is ready to face that future is David Barrett, BCVA council member and professor of bovine medicine, production and reproduction at the University of Bristol.



Not to be missed at congress...

BCVA has all the angles covered when it comes to this year's social calendar. Suffice to say, there is plenty of food and drink involved, not to mention all the catching up with friends and colleagues.

■ **Welcome reception** – Wednesday October 16, 7.30pm at The Majestic Hotel (informal dress). A great way to start congress for early arrivals. To attend, delegates should have acknowledged this on the registration form.

The drinks reception is sponsored by Lilac Technology.

■ **Thursday night dinner** – Thursday October 17, 7.30pm at The Majestic Hotel (informal dress). A Yorkshire pub theme is very fitting and sure to foster a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, with pub food, games and live music. Register early to ensure your place.

The dinner and entertainment is sponsored by Zoetis.

■ **The annual president's dinner** – Friday October 18, 7.30pm at The Majestic Hotel (black tie). This event begins with a drinks reception, followed by a five-course dinner and entertainment. Register early as numbers are limited.

The drinks reception is sponsored by Norbrook Laboratories, while dinner and entertainment are sponsored by Elanco.

He said: "We are moving increasingly into an era of evidence-based veterinary medicine (EBVM). At Bristol and elsewhere this has become an increasingly important driver in our teaching over recent years. However, there are considerable gaps in the evidence base and a desperate need for more research into areas of cattle husbandry and health care.

"EBVM must underpin all our knowledge transfer going forward and practitioners need to embrace best practice based

on good quality research if we are to make progress."

David Barrett added: "The very bright young graduates entering the cattle or livestock areas of the profession need to seek and gain the highest quality postgraduate education possible. BCVA is working hard in this regard through the delivery of CPD and specifically the new certificate modules in collaboration with the universities. Specialist diploma training is also available through the European College of Bovine Health Management."

James Westgate reports on the pressures around food security and how vets have a vital role in ensuring animal health