

CASE STUDY: COLLABORATION IN PRACTICE

In recent years, significant changes have occurred at practice level as a result of 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, writes **Joanne Sharpe**.



XLVets is unique; it exists as a collaborative group of independent practices that cooperate across a wide range of initiatives. The group's 52 members work together to share best practice and advice with other members at local, national and international level. XLVets began as a farm/mixed practice initiative in 2005, but as the value of the concept grew, two further divisions were added: XLEquine and XLVets Small Animal. By working together, opportunities to strengthen veterinary businesses, for mutual benefit, become a possibility.

Practice exchanges enable staff members to see how other practices work and find out what they do the same and differently – and take ideas back to their respective practices. For some team members, such as head nurses, exchanges offer an opportunity to spend time with others in a similar role, which is helpful when they do not have an equivalent counterpart in their own practice.

Jacqui Dodds of Paragon Veterinary Group encourages all practices to consider exchanges or collaborative working. "It's something any practice can consider doing and will benefit from – perhaps look beyond your local area to reduce the sensitivities around sharing information. All roles experience similar issues within the practice and, by engaging with others, we have undoubtedly enhanced our skills, knowledge and abilities. Our practice benefits from this collectively through improved protocols, systems and teamwork to help keep the business moving forward."

XLVets
Excellence in Practice

There's also the opportunity to share best practice. On the farm side, a clinical audit is currently underway to evaluate the success rates of various Caesarean section techniques in cattle. Within the group, over 300 vets have come together and submitted information on around 3,000 C-section cases so far. The results of this research will be of benefit within the XLVets group, to their farm clients, and the wider veterinary profession.

Benchmarking is another tool that has been successful at both a national and regional level within the group. Financial key performance indicators are evaluated at a practice level across the three species groups. Business owners within the practices are using this information to learn what they are doing well, and find areas where they may be able to improve. By identifying another practice that is excelling in a certain area, vets can learn from each other and improve the financial health of their businesses.

Rob Smith of Farm First Vets said: "With current pressures on farm margins, benchmarking with some of the dedicated farm animal veterinary practices within XLVets will prove invaluable. It's early days with the project, but hopefully it will give us an insight into areas where we can improve or make cost savings and we can start making decisions on how to change or expand what we offer as a business."

But it's not only financial benchmarking that can provide benefits to the practice and its clients. Several practices in the South of England, led by Jim Willshire of Endell Veterinary Group, have got together to benchmark their use of antimicrobials.

"Creating a robust method for quantifying antimicrobial usage at a practice and client level, while sharing the data in a confidential and non-judgemental environment, has allowed the group to promote responsible use within, and between, practices. It's also allowed us to create a 'line in the sand' regarding our performance in support of the Government's five-year strategy. The practices have gone on to use the data as an opening to engage with clients regarding their usage, and to give them feedback regarding how they rank within the practice and group distributions," said Jim.

Here we've discussed just a few of the successes that can be achieved through collaborative working. While competition between practices may exist at a local level, many of the XLVets practices have realised that there is more to be gained by working collaboratively, while accepting that healthy competition can exist – a concept in the business world termed "co-opetition".