

Technical and professional diversity

“WE BELIEVE THAT THE VETERINARY PROFESSION HAS A TREMENDOUS DEPTH

of technical and professional diversity that can play a major role in the way we shape and develop food production in the UK.”

So says Jonathan Statham in his written introduction to RAFT Solutions Ltd. Jonathan is a partner with the Bishopton Veterinary Group

in North Yorkshire and chief executive of RAFT. The initiative commenced in 2010 defining the involvement as “Research, Advanced breeding, Food

futures and Training”.

In 2014, Synergy Farm Health in Dorset became incorporated as a shareholding practice and RAFT now has the expertise of 48 veterinary surgeons plus technical support staff. The livestock base of the company covers thousands of dairy and beef cattle in the south-west and north-east, as well as a significant proportion of the pig industry. The company is supported by SQPs, VetTechs, embryologists, project managers, a marketing team and in-house laboratory facilities.

RAFT vets currently hold or have held influential positions within the veterinary industry including roles as presidents of the British Cattle Veterinary Association, Sheep Veterinary Association and Pig Veterinary Society, membership of GB Cattle Health and Welfare Group and roles working alongside the Food Standards Agency and as expert veterinary representative on the Veterinary Residues Committee of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate. RAFT is also the research lead for the XLVets network of 52 UK veterinary practices and thus can access a wide and varied pool of commercial farms for sampling, research study and training.

Currently the main areas for research, consultancy and training are reproduction and genetics, lameness and welfare, sustainable food, antimicrobial resistance and One Health, mastitis and milk quality, biotechnology and diagnostics.

The initiative is described as “specialising in the muddy boots end of research, consultancy and training” and recognising this, partnerships have been developed with leading research institutes and universities. These include the Food and Environment

Research Agency and the universities of Nottingham, Edinburgh, Bristol and the Royal Veterinary College.

RAFT also delivers trials for marketing and registration studies to Good Clinical Practice standards and has over 20 Memoranda of Understanding with a variety of industry companies and research institutions from levy bodies to retailers, processors and

pharmaceutical companies. RAFT was also part of the projects operations team for the development of the Centre for Innovation and Excellence

in Livestock and is a founder member.

Having identified the formal structure, what exactly is RAFT all about? It is evident that UK livestock farming is facing major challenges. For years, money and technical expertise have been directed at many research and development projects with innovative products and management systems resulting.

Commercial interests have promoted and supported new ways, where it is in their interests to do so. The take-up has been variable and some of the findings have been directed at farmers and some at the vets and some at both.

At the recent lameness academy meeting it was indicated that only about 20% of dairy herds are applying recognised beneficial research.

It has always been assumed that veterinary surgeons provide a link between farmers, academia and industry and they do, but RAFT has identified the need to make this a professional target.

The aims go way beyond the veterinary surgeon as an animal technician. Whether a client is requesting improved services or not, the identification of the technical and the practical issues, initially with animal health, welfare and productivity, provide a depth of professional and technical diversity. There is a veterinary and support staff feel-good factor about RAFT.

Many technical improvements on farm take years of attention before the benefits are realised and then economic realities alter and the gain is no longer easy to be recognised. But the farmer of today has to produce livestock according to the demands of the purchaser, processor and retailer, with those demands increasing with time.

It is not surprising that ethics is placed high on the RAFT platform.

In formal mode, Jonathan states it is important to “ensure we not only meet the food needs of the nation but that we do so to the highest possible standards and with the utmost attention to ethics and efficiency”.

This is where the depth of technical and professional diversity also comes into play, as RAFT vets get involved with developing the demands of purchasers: professional veterinary input, expanding from muddy boots to boardroom adviser, to committee member.

Additionally, if the farmer is confident that his production standards are practically-based and going to prove beneficial in the long and short term, then uptake of new developments is more likely.

Extensive training

XLVets has successfully carried out extensive training for farmers within the FarmSkills initiative. Practical skills, with on-farm workshops, have firmed up the basic hands-on awareness for farm staff and others.

At this time of year training workshops for lambing, cattle lameness and hoof trimming, DIY AI, practical calving and the safe use of veterinary medicines are taking place. EquineSkills for horse carers and VetSkills for practice staff, involving clinical and non-clinical CPD, are also available.

This activity over the past seven years has provided the confidence and expertise to expand and move training forward to include awareness of the research conclusions from development projects. Sophie Troup has been involved with the XLVets initiative and she is the managing director of RAFT.

The findings from ongoing consultancies, including clinical trials with bovine and porcine vaccines, green energy pig buildings, animal welfare sensors and the results from clinical data surveillance, are likely to be transferred into training workshops.

A semen referral evaluation service (SemenRate) has been developed from an 18-month research project and this adds to the existing facilities supporting



Jonathan Statham's on-farm tractor bucket laboratory.

modern cattle breeding. Fully licensed embryo and storage facilities are available on-site, at Ripon and Evershot, with IVF and ovum pick-up at a residential facility.

There is considerable interest in food sustainability and food futures.

Advisory notes to government from review bodies include such phrases as “the UK can no longer afford to take its food supply for granted; there is a need to recognise the political and social importance of affordable food; increased investment in public agriculture and food research will be needed; support required for private-public partnership frameworks to deliver technology transfer; the Food and Agricultural Organisation (United Nations) acknowledges that animal diseases are advancing globally as a result of the changing climate”.

There is a warning that if food prices rise there will be greater acceptance of intensive production methods and less priority given to animal welfare, environmental or ethical considerations.

RAFT has been set up as an efficient business and goes beyond veterinary practice diversification. Some of the vets involved are engaged 50% of the time with RAFT projects and there is a dedicated office team involved in the bidding for, delivery and reporting of projects.

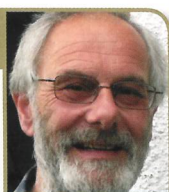
For veterinary practices to involve themselves in the on-farm and national issues is technical and professional diversity indeed and appears very worthwhile.



Phil Alcock's SemenRate project.

RICHARD GARD

reports on progress within the RAFT Solutions initiative, which seeks to capitalise on the role veterinary surgeons can play in influencing sectors of the farming industry



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