

Students immersed in farm practice

TRY to put yourself in the position of Mark Burnell. Imagine the work required to develop a two-week in-practice training programme for final-year veterinary students at the RVC undertaking their compulsory farm animal placement, *writes Richard Gard.*

That's all the students, around 250, approximately 10 a fortnight for 48 weeks of the year.

Accommodation and training facilities have been built by Synergy Farm Health at its premises in Evershot, Dorset, the schedule has been developed and tested, farmers have been recruited for practical sessions and vets within the practice have considered the extent of their personal involvement.

Team effort

Of course this is a team effort and talking to Jo Masters, the practice manager, it is clear just how much thought has gone into the whole programme. Many of the students may never be involved with large animal work after they qualify, but it appears that their attitudes to farm animals and farmers are being widened by the close contact.

There are also overseas students, who will probably return to their own countries. Just how much their future activities will be influenced by their time in Dorset will not be understood for many years. Similarly, it will not be until 2016 that the current students will qualify so it will be interesting to know whether other practices will notice any difference in the attitude of recent graduates from the RVC.

There are teething problems. One student complained that she wasn't able to get her outputs to work. This could have been quite worrying until it became clear that this was a charging problem from socket to appliance. A problem soon solved, as the electricity in the country is similar to London.

But all issues large and small are being attended to, particularly at this early stage of the initiative. Each student has an interim assessment to make sure that the aims of the student and of the college are being met. On the last day there is a more formal final assessment. Any student who fails this has to retake. So far there have been no retakes. The students are referred to, as you might expect, as "bright", "intelligent" and "motivated".

Eight farms are currently involved in providing facilities and animals. There may be clinical cases that are scrutinised at these visits but the aim is to understand routine procedures, interacting with farm staff and handling animals.

Day one includes a camelid session on farm and assembling a rope halter for restraint may seem a basic task but an essential requirement. Alpacas and llamas are perhaps more easily appreciated when the sun is shining but soaking wet fibre might offer a different experience.

Welcoming and beneficial

The farm owners within the practice are welcoming to the students and gain from the visits. There are some financial arrangements for each farm to cover any inconvenience and clearly this has been planned and discussed well in advance.

For fertility visits the group is split into

two and this important topic involves reviews of the aims of veterinary involvement as well as examining cows. As fertility work accounts for one third or more of veterinary time within cattle practice, there is much to appreciate from the visits and discussions.

In the second week there is a session on the business of veterinary practice. Jo makes the point that an appreciation of the office and supply support that enables a vet to work effectively, and the costs associated with practice, is valuable information for the students.

Andrew Davies points out that the inputs are generic to large animal practice and the students are not being shown the Synergy business model. Fertility work as part of veterinary practice business requires sound understanding. So does TB testing and an appreciation of ear tags and veterinary responsibility aspects is carefully explained.

The two other large topic areas in clinical and consultancy practice, mastitis and lameness, make up major sections of the programme. The timetable indicates full sessions on mastitis, combining the classroom with practical farm work.

As the students will have received considerable clinical information earlier in the course, it is the application of that knowledge in practice that is being emphasised. Being able to identify and meet the expectations of the client with mastitis in the herd provides an insight into the difficulties of transferring knowledge into practical benefits.

The lameness programme does contain an element of Synergy management because the practice employs veterinary technicians and offers services including foot trimming, mobility scoring, disbudding, worming and animal vaccination.

A technician delivers a foot trimming session, utilising cadavers, so the students can get up close and personal with the practicalities. With the vets handling cows on farm, examining lesions and assessing lameness risk factors provide further awareness.

The foot trimmers now involved were not that enthusiastic when the idea of training veterinary students was first mooted. They were perhaps being taken outside their comfort zone. The students assess each session and these marks are considered for improving the delivery of the content.

It may or may not be a surprise that it is the foot trimming sessions that receive a consistent 10/10 rating from the students. Mark is very pleased with the



A training seminar in progress for the RVC students at Synergy Farm Health.

effort of all involved. He acknowledges that training students is not for everyone and some of the vets within the practice are reluctant to participate but the team approach is proving its worth.

The programme also includes youngstock, post mortem examinations, a session on small ruminants at Kingston Maurward College and experiencing beef cow management. The complexities of large animal practice will certainly have been suggested to the students by the end of their two weeks of attendance.

Therapeutics

One topic, however, has been found to be of universal interest. The session is simply termed "therapeutics" and it appears that this involves understanding what goes into the vet's car or van and why. It would be interesting to know whether the members of any one practice all carry the same stock of drugs. The students have the opportunity to review the drugs stockroom and the content of the cars.

As might be appreciated, this is an area requiring a defensive approach. Questions are asked, answers given, practical issues discussed and justified. The camelid visit on day one might later raise issues of licensing and the cascade.

The training in Dorset forms part of the production animal teaching at the RVC. John Fishwick, head of the department of production and population health, has developed the programme together with Mark and describes the initiative as a "truly relevant and inspirational experience for those future veterinary surgeons studying at the RVC".

The local NFU has also welcomed the development together with local shops and pubs. The students cater for themselves and one of their first tasks is a trip to the shops for victuals.

The first students arrived in mid February and so the programme is still in its early stages. It will be interesting to hear from the students, the farmers and from the participating veterinary surgeons when more experiences can be related.

continued from previous page

expecting to hear about how to obtain an extra penny per litre for their milk, but Ian Potter had judged the topic perfectly and his thoughts were well received. The three ladies dabbed at their eyes and the chairman called for questions.

One of the younger members of the audience, sitting with her husband, challenged the view that the small dairy farmer was doomed. She has children, 35 cows yielding 8,000 litres each, a relief milker, takes an annual holiday and enjoys being a farmer. They work hard but are not depressed about things and their business is solvent. Why should she borrow money, expand the herd, risk losing the farm to the banks and generally take on more pressure and stress?

An older farmer pointed out that he had been in dairying for 30 years and throughout that time he had heard presentations saying that the only way forward was expansion and that the family farm was a thing of the past. To be able to pass on this way of life

to his willing son, sitting beside him, was a major reason for doing the job, he said.

There were similar comments along the same vein. The farmers were happy to change direction, to work and co-operate and lose production support. They did not share the vision of huge units (500 to 1,000 cows was mentioned by the panel) with the loss of the family farm.

Although he didn't actually say it, the feeling came from Sean Rickard that he did not really accept the young wife's point that they had a good standard of living. One felt that he had done the mental sums and seen that a likely income of £45,000, even if there were no costs incurred, was an insufficient return for the labour of husband, wife and relief milker. What he cannot value is the price placed by the young family on quality of life rather than income.

The future for dairy farming is yet to be decided.

● Richard Gard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or e-mail rgard@agmed.freeserve.co.uk.