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Anthony graduated from Bristol in 1981, has been working at Friars Moor Livestock Health since 1990 and spends time doing both pet and farm work – describing himself as the “last of the dinosaurs”! Anthony is also chairman of the XLVets Farm Executive.

After qualifying Anthony did a project on yaks and yak farming in the Himalayas, worked in mixed practice in West Sussex, before completing the Tropical Animal Health and Production MSc in Edinburgh. He then spent two years in Yemen helping organise rinderpest and goat pox vaccination, FMD reporting, training of local vets and vet technicians.

Anthony is a keen gardener, specialising in profuse weed growth and competitive tomato growing (with the other vets) and is a keen cyclist, who enjoys making beer, cider and cheese.

Providing a veterinary service for smallholders

Farm animal vets are used to – and feel comfortable dealing with – the professional farmer whose priority is the long-term best interests of the farm as a profitable business concern. There is, however, a group of smallholders who keep the same species of animal – cattle, sheep, poultry and pigs – but who may possess a different mind-set and require a different approach from their veterinary surgeon. These smallholders will come from a variety of backgrounds and will have a range of views and motivations.

How do we define smallholders or find out who they are? Stock numbers could be one easily searchable criterion that we can extract from the practice management system; but a smallholder’s attitude to their holding and stock is a more difficult thing to determine.

Motivation

There is no single way of categorising the motivation of the smallholder – for many it is the experience of animal husbandry that is of key importance; for others, the enterprise may be part of a portfolio of income streams and might even be run on a commercial farm basis, but on a smaller scale.

Personally, I have come across a wide variety of backgrounds – from a lecturer with a PhD in ruminant nutrition to others retired from military service; as well as followers of the ‘good life’ ideal or advocates of *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1973) or *The Complete Book of Self Sufficiency* (Seymour, 1976). I remember one woman in her 70s with a small herd of cattle, who had once flown from Cairo to Cape Town single handedly many decades before – so never assume anything or underestimate anyone!

Not all smallholders fit the Tom and Barbara Good model portrayed in the BBC television programme *The Good Life* either; and many may have links to a farming

background. It is always worth asking to find out about the smallholder and their motivation. A question about how they started their enterprise and what they did before may be fruitful; and do not forget to pass on relevant information to others within the practice team.

Status

The status of smallholders can be described as amateur as opposed to professional. I would agree with the use of this word, but only in the original etymological meaning of amateur, which is derived from *amare*, to love. In this sense, amateur is used with the meaning of doing something for the love of it as opposed to for purely financial motives. However, on occasions – notably in the case of my brother-in-law – I would be able to use the word amateur in its more patronising sense!

When considering the status and motivation of an individual, their love and enjoyment of smallholding can be apparent in their relationship with the stock. In keeping fewer animals than a professional farmer, there is the potential to develop a stronger bond with individual

animals and, therefore, there may be some similarities with pet owners in their attitudes and their depth of care and commitment to the individual animal (Figures 1, 2 & 3). This has to be borne in mind when dealing with sick animals, especially when there is a poor prognosis, where euthanasia has to be considered.

Another issue that arises from the smaller size of the holding and the fewer numbers of stock is that the loss of a single animal has, proportionately, a greater effect than on a larger holding.

Advice

Given that smallholders are ‘amateurs’, the veterinary professional has an additional role in the education of these clients. Separate newsletters, with a different emphasis from those written for professional farmers, are worth considering. The information in these has to be tailored, and must appeal to a wide knowledge base, yet contain worthwhile information for all. Smallholders are often eager for knowledge, but this should always be modified to suit their prior experience and background, because basic handling and husbandry advice may be required (Figure 4).

“Smallholders can often be advocates for the veterinary practice, and enjoy having good relations with the practice and the practice team”



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Figures 1, 2 & 3. Smallholders may develop a strong bond with individual animals, to the extent that there may be some similarities with pet owners.

There is probably a rule that the effectiveness of any handling system is inversely proportional to the number of animals kept; although, as with everything, there are exceptions to this. When visiting smallholders, safety

of the veterinary surgeon and the smallholder should always be borne in mind when doing anything on the holding. Never be reticent about giving clear directions on how to hold an animal and where to stand – you may have to think for

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several people in a way that would be unnecessary on larger farms, where staff know how stock behave and where to stand, instinctively.

The issue of smallholders' amateur status can at times be of benefit to the veterinary practice. We have found that smallholders have helped us in providing invaluable experience for new graduates in developing their skills in such procedures as calving and lambing. These can be less difficult than on a professional farm where the easier births will have been managed by the more experienced staff.

Another benefit to our new graduates is that the giving of an educational talk to smallholders can be less daunting than addressing their first talk to professional farmers.

Disease issues

The stock numbers on a smallholding may also have a positive impact on spread of infection – keeping a small group of animals will reduce the reservoir of infection and the viral and bacterial infective load and this might have an impact on the disease prevention advice.

Attitudes to vaccination and policies for its application should be considered in relation to the size of the holding and the likely impact of the disease in question. Package and bottle size and quantities of vaccines or medicines might be a factor limiting the use of vaccination or prophylaxis. On large farms, veterinary professionals and farmers must have the long-term interests of the

whole herd and farm at heart, whereas on smallholdings, a veterinary surgeon needs to be prepared to adapt normal farm decisions to take account of the owner's wishes, as the financial driver may not be as straightforward.

Economics

Charging for work on smallholdings is an area that needs to be clear and transparent and should always be considerate to both the smallholder and the veterinary practice. All enterprises need levels of fees that are appropriate – a bill for several hours of unexpected chargeable time will not be appreciated.

Courses may be a more effective means of providing advice to several smallholders, rather than charging for many hours of advice to one single holding. Separate courses should be run for smallholders as distinct from professional farmers, and a 'smallholders club' is often a valued service and good fun for attendees and the practice team (Figure 5).

The ability to dispense medication that is needed for treatment and prophylaxis of individual animals and small groups is an important advantage for smallholders using their veterinary practice, because keeping unnecessary or large stocks of medicines that will go out of date is not acceptable on either smallholdings or commercial farms. Proper record keeping should always be encouraged as with larger farms. A good knowledge of medicines legislation for the attending veterinary surgeon is just as important when dealing with

smallholders as it is with professional farmers.

Niche farming issues

Some smallholders may be keen to follow organic practices, even if they are not registered under the various organic schemes. They may not be used to the withdrawal times that are a part of professional farmers' daily routines. It is important to find out attitudes to medicines use for individuals and not make assumptions about follow-up treatment – the use of long-acting preparations is often advisable, especially where handling systems and staff numbers make catching and restraining animals difficult.

Our smallholder clients have embraced the practice of worm egg counts before worming and SCOPs (Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep) protocols. They have also often been keen to follow current best practice on worming and responsible use of antibiotics, once the principles have been explained.

Summary

Smallholders can often be advocates for the veterinary practice, and enjoy having good relations with the practice and the practice team. All of them take a great deal of pride in what they do and value assistance and advice in doing that job properly, efficiently and productively.

The main differences between smallholders and professional farmers are in scale, motivation, access to resources, staffing levels, time for observation, husbandry skills and knowledge base.

The similarities are the animals, legislative framework, and economic climate. Working with smallholders requires thought and adaptability, but can be a very rewarding part of farm practice work and life. ■

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Figure 4. Basic handling and husbandry advice may be required.



Figure 5. Separate courses should be run for smallholders and a 'smallholders club' is often a valued service.

References

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