

# Exciting future for large animal vets

BACK in the day, 1994 that is, when I was a newly qualified vet in North Yorkshire, I was living the dream.

I had consumed a diet of Saturday evening TV episodes of James Herriot throughout my childhood, and I had seen plenty of practice with farm vets who dashed around the countryside in their cars too fast and heroically fought with the elements to drip cows, lamb ewes, operate for left displaced abomasums (LDAs) and, of course, plenty of arms up backside stuff – proper vets.

In those days, too, times were good in dairy farming. Farmers never admitted to that, of course.

The constant claims of poverty over the previous years perhaps didn't bring them the sympathy they deserved over the following 15 years or so. In 1997, the picture was already very different – milk prices had plummeted, the BSE crisis meant no one much wanted the meat either, and soon after came the "over 30 month compensation scheme" (OTMS), which meant lots of requests for casualty slaughter certificates.

Then came the 2001 foot-and-mouth catastrophe. No wonder, perhaps, that between 2000 and 2010, the number of dairy farms in the UK halved.

What about the vets during these years? Simultaneously, there was the competition committee looking into the price of veterinary medicines, and the Marsh report examining supply of medicines to farm, both of which seemed

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looks at the challenges that have faced farm vets in the past 20 years and looks ahead to how they can grasp future opportunities



to hover over practitioners like the sword of Damocles. Farming was on its knees, and many practices relied ever more heavily on companion animals. James Herriot cosiness, it was not.

Amid all this despair, in 1999, a couple of young upstart vets left an established mixed practice in Cheshire and started up one of the first farm-only start-up practices, concentrating mainly on dairy cows. The cat was firmly set among the pigeons when it became clear they had slashed medicine prices, instead aiming to derive a greater proportion of their income from professional fees. It was an attractive combination for many larger dairy farms and the practice soon grew, much to the distress of neighbouring practices (I should know, as I worked in one). This new practice, Lambert, Leonard and May Farm Vets, is now the one I co-own and am very proud to be working in. While it might have helped lead the way, many

other exclusively farm animal practices now exist, with a similar approach to pricing.

Fast forwards to today, and farming is looking better – I have never known so much confidence in the future of UK dairying. It's very tempting to think us hard-done-by farm vets have been through our tough times and now the good times will roll, and that the next 20 years will be all about opportunities, not challenges.

Well, hang on, hasn't it been all those challenges of the past that gave us the opportunities to shape the better structured farm vet businesses we have now? I wouldn't want to turn back the clock to when farms were smaller and less business-focused, and the vets who served them were almost all mixed-species generalists. The challenges will continue, but I say bring them on, because I'm impatient for further change to the way farm vets work.

If we can be self-critical for a moment, let's consider what

we've failed to achieve as vets to the dairy industry in the past 20 years. Fertility is worse, lameness is worse, mastitis is still running at around 75 cases per 100 cows per year, and I can't think of a single endemic disease we have made significant progress in reducing, let alone eradicating. We still rely too heavily on medicine sales, and we still spend too much time working inefficiently. By this, I mean too much time dashing around the countryside being heroes, and not enough time managing farms for better health.

The biggest challenge to us, I believe, is how the vet's role is perceived – by ourselves, by our farmers and by society. James Herriot, bless him, could have a lot to answer for.

The demand from farmers is still largely to help them out of difficulties once the damage has been done. When the telephone starts ringing from clients with requests for spending some time to help devise a dry cow strategy, rather than to come and operate on yet another LDA, for example, then I know we'll be close to cracking it. And when farmers gladly pay for this type of veterinary input and realise its value, I can sit back and relax.

### Time to raise game

Currently, it seems most dairy farms employ a consultant (or several), so why do they not utilise vets more in this respect? Is it a perception that it isn't our role, is it that we are too expensive, is it that we don't have the right skills, or the right knowledge, or the right training, or is it that we don't set our stall out right? I suspect it's a combination of all of these.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act protects the profession from competition for the unprofitable and unpleasant out-of-hours calving, the inefficient (from a business perspective)



Performing a caesarean on a sunny afternoon – probably the type of work we'd hoped to be doing when we became vets.



Not such an adrenaline rush, but time spent on an holistic approach to cow management might be a far more effective use of veterinary resources.

driving around rectaling cows, fixing problems and performing surgery, but not from advisory work.

Of course the act isn't there to protect the vet, but the consumer and its animals. Nevertheless, it has perhaps contributed to the vet fulfilling too narrow a niche. But now it's time to raise our game – and build our business models around more intelligent, fee-earning use of our time.

So, my tips for the aspiring farm vet are:

- don't look to vets who are in practice now as your role models;

- expand our niche;
- think how you can be most effective in your work;
- develop skills not necessarily veterinary science-related: communication skills, business skills and marketing;
- understand and have confidence in your ability to improve livestock farming for better profitability, better animal welfare, better enjoyment for everyone working in farming, and better public health protection; and, finally
- enjoy it, because it's fascinating, rewarding and definitely the veterinary sphere to be in during the next 20 years. ■

OWEN ATKINSON has worked in farm animal practice since 1994, mainly with dairy cows. He began his career in Northallerton before moving to the University of Liverpool teaching farm animal veterinary practice, and then Wrexham. He is now settled in Cheshire, where he is a partner in Lambert, Leonard and May, which is part of the XLVets group of practices. Owen's interests in rumen health, cattle foot care and lameness reduction lead him to do an increasing amount of training and advisory work. In 2007, he became a fully qualified trainer in the system of practical cattle management. In 2009, Owen was awarded a Trehane Trust Nuffield travel scholarship to look into the role of the dairy vet in knowledge transfer, during which he studied farming in the Netherlands, New Zealand and US.

