

# Viewpoint

## A public or private profession?

As the trend continues for veterinary practices to concentrate their services more on pet owners than the food industry, **Philip Lowe** asks whether vets run the risk of forfeiting their input into UK policy development and being branded as 'just another private sector service industry'

EVERY profession has its stereotypes and, 30 years ago, mention of 'the vet' would have conjured up images of James Herriot, a mainstay of the rural community, covering a mixed practice, and a vital part of the food-producing agricultural world. But what image does 'the vet' evoke in the 21st century? For most people he or she is an urban-based professional working in a small business that provides services – often involving highly technical treatments – for companion animals. We see this reflected in the statistics. The proportion of time vets in private practice spent on treating food animals went down from slightly more than 20 per cent in 1998 to just over 10 per cent by 2006.

It is undeniable that clients bringing much-loved pets into the surgery are often more willing and able to pay for specialist services and individual treatment than are farmers, who must make decisions based on the economic value of their animals. A journalist writing in *The Guardian* recently admitted spending over £2000 on veterinary

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treatment for a sick guinea pig, and this is far from unusual. So, is it unreasonable to expect most vets to regard pet owners as their most important customer base? Veterinary practices are private businesses after all and, like any enterprise, they need to make money.

Looking at this from the point of view of the farmer, if the veterinary profession is spending less time on caring for farm animals, is there actually a shortage of farm vets? In terms of numbers, it would appear



not. My report 'Unlocking potential: a report on veterinary expertise in food animal production' (Lowe 2009) did not find an overall mismatch between supply and demand in the rural sector, nor indeed any widespread sense among farmers that large animal vets were difficult to find – although some concerns were expressed about whether existing practices always met the broader needs of food-producing businesses.

So what's the problem? If vets are happy to become just another private sector service industry, without any part to play in UK policy development, perhaps there isn't one. They can operate successfully as individual small businesses like any other. But would that make the best use of the considerable talents and expertise of a group of highly trained and key professionals, in terms of potential public good? I would argue that it also diminishes the public standing of the whole profession. I certainly couldn't imagine the medical establishment in this country accepting a role that marginalised public health, even if the NHS did not exist. More seriously for all of us, I believe that not involving vets in this important area also puts food safety in the UK at risk.

The relationship between the veterinary profession and government has always been complex. Vets are indispensable combatants in the national battle against threats such as bluetongue and avian influenza, and are often highly valued in this role. But as

practices have concentrated more on services to pet owners rather than to the food industry, their distance from government has become more and more evident. Government has not only stepped back from regulation of supply; the proportion of the profession it employs directly has shrunk drastically. In 1966, 69 per cent of all vets were in private practice, but by 2006 this had grown to 88 per cent, while in the

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same period the percentage of vets employed in government had shrunk from 11 per cent to a mere 4 per cent. This shift is reflected in teaching and research, which have also moved away from farm animal concerns and food production.

The consequences merit discussion and debate. In the past, the veterinary arm of government traditionally provided leadership to the whole profession. The Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) was seen as being at the helm, not just within government but for all vets. The CVO's authority was sustained by the proportion of vets' income derived from the public purse. But over recent years the emphasis and direction of the post have changed, as government has sought to emphasise the responsibility of owners for the health and welfare of their animals.

Our current position sees government having to access veterinary expertise from the private sector in order to meet its legal obligations, and for some small practices this has become an important source of revenue. However, there is little influence to be gained via this route (even though it may fuel the farmers' view of vets as 'quasi-regulators'), and unforeseen changes in government policy may be greeted by these same practices with dismay. >

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At the same time, we live in an age when there is real and widespread public concern about welfare standards for farm animals, threats from animal diseases old and new, and food safety. Is there not an important role here for the animal expert? I would argue that there is, and that, by taking it up, the veterinary profession will not only be fulfilling a vital public health function, but also restoring the regard of consumers, and ensuring a central and respected role for itself in society.

How can such a change be achieved? While government should not be allowed to

shirk its responsibilities, nor the farming, food and animal health industries, recognition that action is needed and self-examination within the veterinary profession must be important first steps. Too many young vets are put off farm practice before they have had a chance to develop their skills and confidence, so there has to be more specialist training and support in this area for the veterinary student and the early-days practitioner. The farm vet's position and respect for their expertise must be restored, but not in the old Herriot mould. He or she has to take on the much greater

challenge of risk and welfare regulation and management across the food system. This would mean providing a vital public service, and could be a vehicle for renewing a sense of identity, direction and prestige for the whole profession.

### Reference

LOWE, P. (2009) Unlocking potential: a report on veterinary expertise in food animal production. Available at [www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/policy/animalhealth/vservices/index.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/policy/animalhealth/vservices/index.htm). Accessed February 9, 2010

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