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Communication in farm animal practice

1. Farmer–vet relationships



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Owen Atkinson

Farm animal practice continues to evolve and, more and more, the role of the farm animal vet is that of a communicator of knowledge. Herd health planning and advisory work are recognised as important areas for the farm vet practitioner to embrace (Lowe 2009). To be successful in these areas, vets must be sophisticated and effective communicators, and need to develop new skills to engage with farm clients in increasingly challenging environments. In this two-part article, Owen Atkinson uses fictitious case studies to outline some of the challenges vets face. Part 1 outlines some theories on farmer–vet relationships, while Part 2, to be published in the April issue of *In Practice*, looks at the processes involved in facilitating change.

Case study 1

Frank had been a client of Practice A for over 15 years. He was a progressive dairy farmer, in it for the long term and pushing cow numbers slowly up to 250.

Jeremy had been his vet for many years, carrying out fortnightly visits. When Jeremy rolled up in the yard, everyone had to be on their toes. Sometimes, if things had gone a bit wrong during morning milking and were running late, Frank would get quite stressed about the vet visit and would shout at the cows while Jeremy kept checking his watch and became more and more impatient. No one could fault Jeremy's skill at fertility work, but Frank often tired of his constant nagging to vaccinate against this, that and the other. When the pregnancy diagnoses were going badly, Jeremy always seemed to be blaming various diseases Frank should vaccinate against.

When Jeremy left the practice to 'go into academia', a series of young vets would come to carry out the farm's routine fertility visits. Frank couldn't even remember the names of some of them. At least most of them seemed in less of a hurry than Jeremy, and sometimes they even helped him sort the cows out before the visit. Certainly, the visits were a bit more relaxed now and Frank felt that some of the vets were quite human, and he could even share a laugh with them. However, despite Jeremy's poor bedside manner, Frank had never felt quite as confident in the pregnancy diagnosing ability of those that followed him.

This year, Frank, with the help of his new consultant, was making some changes to reduce his vet bill and improve his cow fertility. Thanks to the interest taken by the consultant, a full review of his farm's performance had been carried out. The consultant had shown him how he could be selling 5 per cent more milk per day from the same number of cows, if only the average days

in milk could be brought down by a couple of weeks. This would be worth an extra £1000 per month gross profit. Frank invested in a computerised cow activity meter system to help him improve his heat detection and, with the help of his consultant and some bulk milk sampling, he established that his herd was endemically infected with bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD). The next step was probably to vaccinate against BVD – the consultant had estimated the likely cost of the vaccine and said it would probably be cheapest from an internet pharmacy.

In the climate of low milk prices, the consultant and Frank had examined all the variable costs of the business, and the spend on vet fees and medicines at nearly 0.9 pence per litre of milk was an area they wanted to tackle. Next year, Frank intended to organise his vets' routine visits more efficiently, making them monthly instead of fortnightly, mainly to inject prostaglandin in the cows that the lay scanner technician had previously identified as suitable. The consultant had pointed out several advantages of using the lay scanner – he wouldn't necessarily be cheaper, but would be able to detect twins (which helped his precalving management) and, because he was doing it all the time, would be considerably quicker and more accurate than many of these new vets. Frank was also attracted by the fact the lay scanner he had spoken to was quite prepared to come at 7.30am, immediately after milking. This would be better for his cows than having them waiting around for an extra hour and a half for the vet.

Frank looked forwards to next year, when the consultant intended to help him reduce his mastitis costs significantly too, using a new mastitis control plan. The £400 per month contract fee, he reflected, was very reasonable given the extra efficiencies the consultant was helping him to make.

Challenges of developing a farm animal veterinary advisory role

The tongue-in-cheek story in the box above illustrates just a few of the challenges faced by farm animal vets in practice today. The farmer–vet relationship is changing, the needs of farmers are evolving and the advisory

role of the production vet is not one that is protected by the Veterinary Surgeons Act – sources of animal health advice for farmers are numerous, pharmaceuticals can be purchased very readily elsewhere and farmers are increasingly under time pressures, meaning animal health is not always top of their priority list. The production animal vet must therefore adapt and compete.

One common thread that can help reduce all of the above challenges is investing in better communication skills. Taking time to learn more about interpersonal relationships, the psychology of making changes, motivation and learning styles, and the subtleties of facilitation and coaching, rather than instruction and advice, are all part of the game.

Founts of all knowledge?

Vets are scientists and evidence-based veterinary medicine is what they strive for. Their self-esteem stems from what they know and it is important to them that they get it right. Knowledge is their stock and trade, and it is no surprise that they tend to spout it! This is perhaps why vets, while highly regarded for their advice and technical knowledge, are also often criticised for their arrogance and poor listening skills (Cannas da Silva and others 2006). Popular consultants are not necessarily bursting with knowledge and their understanding may be less deep. However, they can communicate. They know how to listen, say less, empathise, build relationships, ask questions, establish what the farmer wants and coach. A simple equation illustrates this point:

Result = Knowledge x Communication (acceptance)

An individual such as Jeremy in the case study above may score 9 out of 10 for his/her knowledge, but if communication is poor, say, 3 out of 10, the overall result is moderate, in this case 27 out of 100. Contrast this with an individual with only very average knowledge, say, 5 out of 10, but good communication skills, say, 8 out of 10, and overall result is much greater, in this case 40 out of 100. As vets, it can be easy to fall into a trap stemming from a knowledge-based education and culture.

Relationship models

Of course, communication can be a science too. The farmer–vet interpersonal relationships can be modelled and explored in quite theoretical terms. It is clear that different clients can demand different kinds of collaboration, depending on their own experience, knowledge and inclination to collaborate. This has been modelled into three further different stages by Meens (2006) as seen in the box on the right. In the ‘You phase’, the farmer is heavily dependent on the vet and may trust the vet to make decisions and define the objectives and action to be taken. The ‘I phase’ is characterised by a farmer acting largely autonomously, with the vet being regarded as a provider of a certain means to an end. Put another way, the farmer is in full control of the relationship and may use the vet just as a technician, or possibly only as a writer of prescriptions and/or dispenser of medicines. Finally, the ‘We phase’ sees both the farmer and vet collaborating to achieve common goals previously defined together.

The ‘You phase’, therefore, may describe the type of relationship that James Herriot usually enjoyed. Possibly, 40 years ago, a farmer may have admired the

gravitas of Jeremy’s character instead of finding him rather pompous today. Consequently, the ‘I phase’ describes the new relationship that Frank is about to enter into with his vet. In this example, the farmer will also choose the lay scanner over the vet for part of his requirements. The ‘We phase’ is what farm vets should strive for. In this case, it is only Frank’s consultant who achieves this relationship.

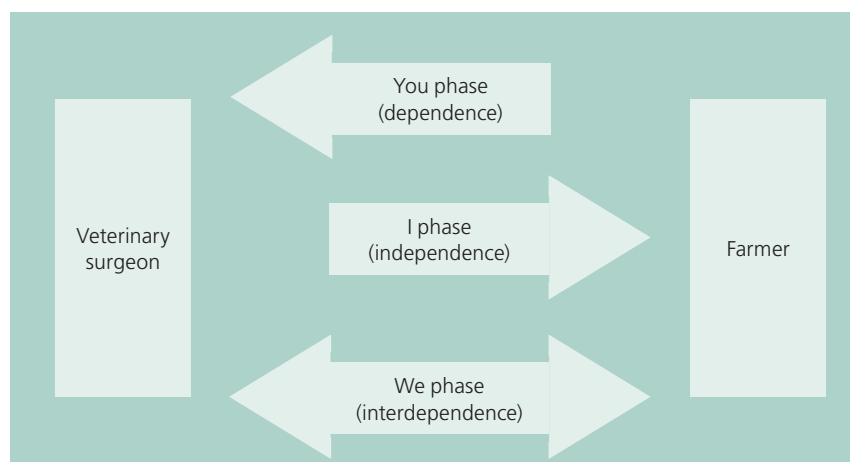
Building relationships

Managing relationships is a skill practised in all walks of life. Many farm vets are excellent at building strong working relationships with their clients. Often, these personal bonds have been built up over many visits for clinical work and can form a great foundation for moving forward with advisory work because a level of trust is normally established. In the case study above, Jeremy failed to understand the role of personal relationship, and his focus on clinical excellence alone was not enough to allow any progression with his client.

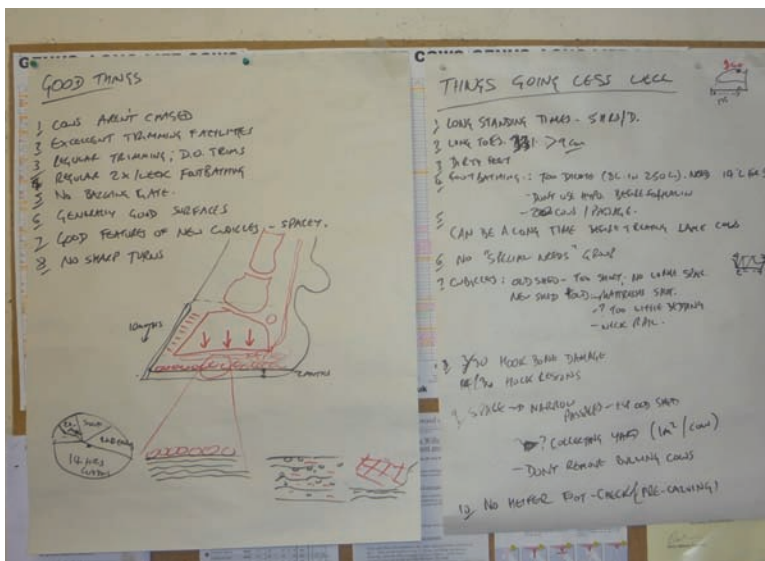
However, familiar farmer–vet personal relationships can also be a hindrance to establishing an advisory role. Have you ever been frustrated when a farm client seems to take no notice of you, but will heed an outside ‘expert’ who gives the same advice? One definition of an expert is someone who travels from more than 30 miles away! A common solution to this problem in practice is to use internal referrals within a practice or between neighbouring practices. Yet, by taking a proactive approach to relationship management, it can be possible to progress a strong personal relationship with a farm client to a sound footing for advisory work. There are four phases to consider in this new relationship and these are considered below.

Agenda setting

Good consultancy begins with establishing an agenda. This sets out the farmer’s goals, and is characterised by open questioning and listening. Open questions are ones that cannot have a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, and begin with ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘who’. It is important to understand how a client perceives a problem, and what they value most in a solution. Kristensen and Enevoldsen (2008) found that there is often a mismatch in what a farmer values in a herd health programme



Levels of interaction between the vet and farmer, as described by Meens (2006)



Flip charts can be used to build an action plan that involves the whole farm team, as shown here for lameness reduction

(animal welfare and team work) compared with what the vet perceives them to value (better profits and increased knowledge). Never take others' concerns and values for granted and never make assumptions.

It is prudent to establish some common goals and desired outcomes. For clinical work, the desired outcome is usually obvious; in the case of a sick cow, it would be the return of that animal to full health and production. However, even simple problem-based advisory work, such as investigating infertility, requires an outcome to be set. In this case study, the vet may have targets to improve heat detection rates to 85 per cent, conception rates to 50 per cent and a calving interval of 380 days with less than 8 per cent culls for infertility, but the farmer's goal may be simply to have 20 calvings per month. Broader goals may include where the farmer wishes his business to go and what personal objectives he has.

Investigation

After setting the agenda comes the investigative phase. Typically, careful data analysis is needed, which requires skill and in-depth understanding. The work may be problem-based (eg, helping with a fertility or mastitis problem) or more focused on preventive health planning, requiring quality and risk management (Noordhuizen and others 2008). More recently qualified vets, in particular, have a good understanding of the skills that are valuable in this phase, and specific programmes such as the DairyCo Mastitis Control Plan (www.mastitiscontrolplan.co.uk) can be very useful tools.

Learning styles

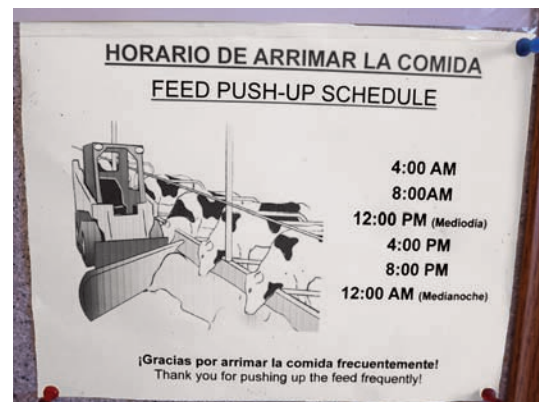
Accommodator

The accommodator learns by experience, trial and error. This person will definitely not read an instruction booklet! They are practically orientated.

Converger

The converger learns by putting theories into practice. This person will read the manual cover to cover and implement the instructions step by step.

Adapted from Kolb (1984)



Laminated standard operating procedures that can be easily understood by the relevant staff can be far more useful than lengthy written reports

The timeline for the investigation and analysis phase may be finite for a problem-based approach, or be continuous for an ongoing risk management health planning service. However, in either case, there will need to be a reporting phase.

Reporting

Ideally, the reporting phase should take into account the preferred learning style of the farmer (Lam and others 2008). Some farmers may prefer well-constructed written arguments, facts, figures, graphs and examples, while others may prefer choices to experiment with. Four potential learning styles are summarised in the box below, adapted from Kolb (1984).

In practice, although many individuals may have a preference for one particular learning style, they will learn by a combination of two or more, and will have different preferences for different scenarios. The process of receiving and learning information is complicated by personality, previous experiences, intellect, personal situations and preconceived ideas and prejudices. The key thing is to be aware that the person who is reported to may think in a very different way to the reporter.

A common problem encountered on farm is identifying who to report to: the herdsman, the owner, the milker, the non-English-speaking assistant, or all four! While it may seem evident that it is the owner's responsibility to disseminate information on the farm, a good adviser will communicate relevant advice to the whole farm team to achieve a successful outcome.

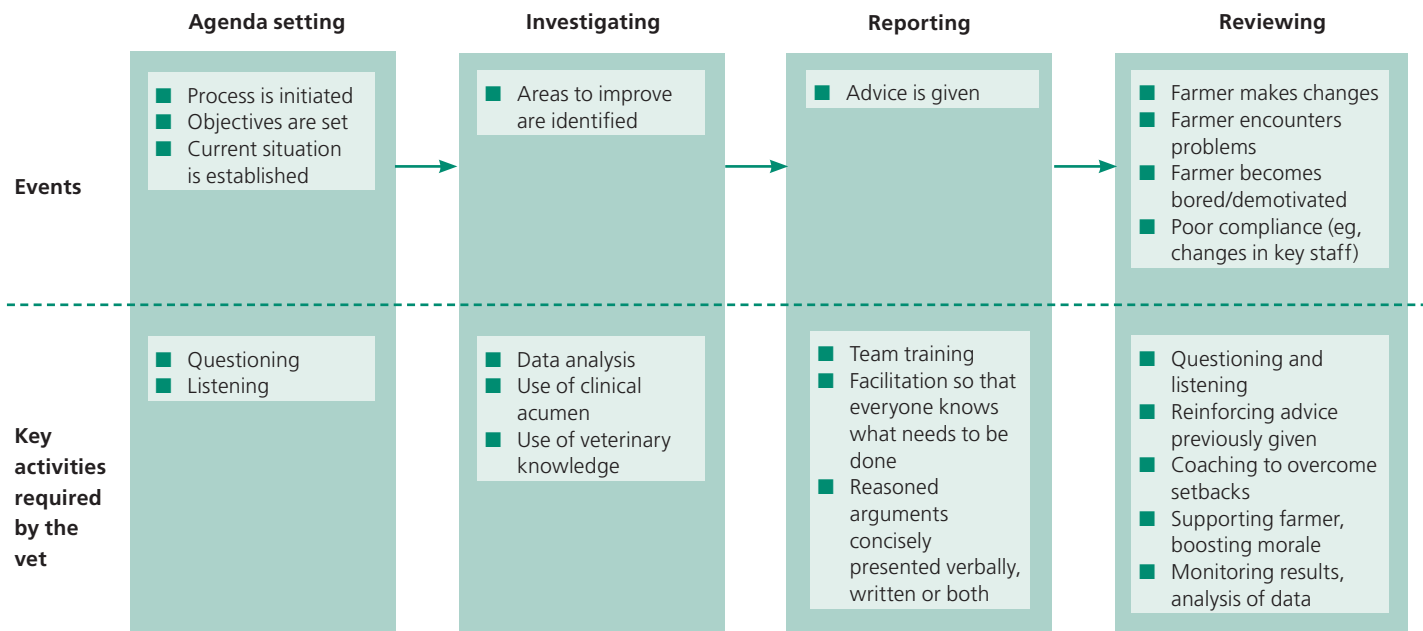
Novel reporting techniques should be considered. Presentations to the farm team, possibly using a PowerPoint slideshow with pictures, may be useful. A workshop style flip chart approach can be a valuable tool for involving individuals in the process of finding

Diverger

The diverger learns by weighing up different perspectives. Often creative, they enjoy discussion groups, visits to model farms and so on.

Assimilator

The assimilator learns by sorting information into concise logic. They take a scientific approach, sourcing information from many different places and gradually forming an idea.



An example advisory timeline

solutions. It can be far more useful to provide laminated sheets and protocols for key standard operating procedures rather than lengthy written reports.

Most adults learn better by activity rather than listening or reading. This may be particularly true for individuals who did not relish the classroom environment when they were younger. Some useful techniques for this type of communication (participatory learning activities) can be found in the further reading section at the end of this article. Many such techniques have been conceived and are commonly used for knowledge exchange in developing countries for human and animal health programmes.

Reviewing and checking

Without reviewing and checking, the reporting phase is like throwing a pebble into a pond: a splash followed by ripples that disappear to nothing. Like the first phase, this last phase will require more questions and listening. First, check that the advice is being followed. If it isn't, find out the reason or reasons why. It can require great courage and strength of character to review, and one must be prepared to deal with failure or criticism. If things have not gone to plan, it is not time to abandon the advice (assuming the investigative phase was carried out correctly), but to provide continued support and revisit the reporting phase. The reviewing and checking phase is also an opportunity to ensure the advice has been appropriate and to fine-tune it. For ongoing preventive work, the review and checking phase should be a continual periodic process. For problem-based consultancy work, this phase is over when the objectives identified in phase one are complete.

Failure to review and check on progress during an advisory work programme has been found to be a very common failing of farm animal practitioners. During a recent review of an Australian mastitis reduction plan (Countdown MAX), Penry and others (2009) found that the main block to success was vets' and advisers' ability to fully deliver the plans, with only 38 per cent

continued to the review stage, despite farmers' willingness to do so. Always follow up advice by asking after it – if nothing else, it shows the farmer that you care!

Try and identify where your strengths and weaknesses may occur along this timeline. Different communication skills are important at each phase; remember that excellent questioning and listening skills are particularly important at phases 1 and 4. An appreciation of the 'cycle of change', which will be discussed in Part 2 of this article, may help identify where any problems with compliance are.

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