Them and us: Understanding how farm consultants view the veterinary profession – results of a survey of 25 farm consultants on their attitude towards the role of veterinarians in farm businesses

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Introduction

All veterinarians involved in the provision of full time farm veterinary services will have interacted with one or more farm consultants, either in person or via the farmer, whenever the discussion progresses from treatment of an individual sick animal to the health of the herd and its future productivity and profitability. Equally, much has been written about the need for farm veterinarians to develop the range of communication, farm system and economic assessment skills required to engage more fully with farmers in improving herd profitability (Kristensen and Jakobsen 2011). Many veterinarians and veterinary practices have responded to this by developing consultancy capability both individually and at a business level with several different business models identified (Penry 2013).

The attitude of farmers to these innovations has also been studied by Hall and Wapenaar (2012) and Kaler and Green (2013) but relatively little has been published about the attitude of full time, non-veterinary farm consultants on the role and value of farm veterinarians.

In 2014, Vetlife – a mixed veterinary business in the South Island of New Zealand – commissioned a survey by Cinta Research Ltd, a quantitative and qualitative research service specialising in the New Zealand agricultural industry, to conduct a survey of local dairy farm consultants to explore their attitudes towards the veterinary profession.

The survey was developed to assess the message alignment between farm consultants and veterinarians encountered in their professional working lives and substantiate whether or not farm consultants view animal health recommendations as being unbiased and free from commercial interest. Further, the aim was to determine how consultants perceive veterinarians, the value they place on veterinary involvement in a farm business and what they believe that involvement should be. Where differences emerged, the survey sought to find out how consultants believed these could be resolved and a better working partnership established.
Sampling methodology

All contact was carried out by Cinta research Ltd and farm consultants were not aware of the identity of the business commissioning the survey and confidentiality and anonymity were stressed throughout the survey. Consultants operating in the same geographical area of New Zealand as Vetlife and delivering a full time, fee earning business advising farmers were identified and approached for involvement with the survey. Twenty five separate farm consultants, from 21 different farm consulting businesses (14 single operators, seven from multi–person or corporate firms) agreed to participate out of 36 approached and formal telephone interviews were carried out by Cinta Research personnel using a pre-prepared questionnaire.

Questions were designed to elicit either factual answers which could be categorised (for example: ‘How many years have you been working as a farm consultant?’) or required a numerical score (from 1–5 and with 6 for ‘don’t know’) measuring agreement with a statement (for example: ‘veterinarians are focused on their own profitability rather than farmer profitability’). A further category consisted of a series of set questions, the unprompted answers to which were collated by the survey team and matched to a series of non–disclosed standard reply categories for each question. For example the answers to the set question ‘Please tell me the types of information sources you refer to or ways you up skill your knowledge on animal health?’ were recorded and matched to one or more of the following standard replies:

• What I have learnt over the years with consulting to dairy farmers
• Information/expertise from Dairy NZ
• Information/expertise from LIC (Livestock Improvement Company)
• Information/expertise from actual Pharmaceutical/animal health companies
• Information/expertise from Universities please specify
• Qualifications/formal tertiary study e.g. Masters, PhD, diploma
• I read animal health publications
• I attend animal health conferences
• I refer to animal health websites
• Animal health on line discussion group
• Don’t know
• Other – please specify

The last three set questions in the survey were designed to allow the capture of more general statements, for example: ‘What do you believe gets in the way of a team approach between the farmer, consultant and vet?’

All numerical question answers were analysed using ‘SurveyPro’ software (Apian Corporation Virginia USA) and where present, significant differences at the 95% level identified.

Results

Farm consultants generally see themselves as the custodians of the animal health budget on farm with animal health spending seen as an expense to be controlled rather than as an investment. Figure 1 summarises responses to questions on animal health spend.
Farm consultants that have spent more than five years in the industry were significantly more likely to view animal health expenditure negatively (p<0.05).

Farm consultants use a wide range of additional resources to keep up to date and informed. Attending conferences, participating in online discussion groups and reading publications were the most commonly cited methods of professional development together with a strong emphasis from respondents on the value of personal experience. The information sources used by consultants are summarised in Figure 2.
Generally, farm consultants are mis-trustful of veterinary impartiality (p<0.05) and this is illustrated in Figure 3.

Vets are focused on their own profitability rather than farmer profitability

Vets always have a vested interest in the animal health advice they give farmers

Figure 3. Summary of attitudes to veterinary impartiality from 25 farm consultants surveyed in 2014 as part of the Vetlife farm consultant survey. The figure shows the range of agreement from 1–5 from the consultants surveyed together with the average agreement score for the statement beneath each dial chart.

However, generally farm consultants felt that they were in alignment and respectful with the advice given by veterinarians and this is summarised in Figure 4.

Vets and consultants are not in alignment with the advice farmers are told

I don't respect the advice vets provide farmers

Figure 4. Summary of attitudes to veterinary advice from 25 farm consultants surveyed in 2014 as part of the Vetlife farm consultant survey. The figure shows the range of agreement from 1–5 from the consultants surveyed together with the average agreement score for the statement beneath each dial chart.
Figure 5a

Summary of attitudes to the role of veterinarians in improving animal health performance and productivity (5a) and on the perceived key areas where farm businesses should consult with a veterinarian (5b) from 25 farm consultants surveyed in 2014 as part of the Vetlife farm consultant survey. The figure shows the percentage of consultants that select particular areas as key roles for veterinarians (5a) and as key areas where farmers should consult with veterinarians (5b).

The survey revealed that farm consultants are ambivalent about the role of veterinarians in farm profitability and production. In answers to questions focussing on animal health, consultants clearly identified veterinarians as the key providers and this is shown in Figure 5a. However, consultants feel that the main interactions between farmer and vet should be the provision of retail services (commodities) and the treatment of sick and injured stock rather than farm productivity or profitability as shown in Figure 5b.

Thus there is a clear expectation from consultants that veterinarians should be involved in preventing and treating animal disease but that the main interactions between veterinarians and farmers should centre on retail products such as vaccines and dry cow treatments. Moreover, there is relatively little expectation that veterinarians will be involved in farm productivity or profitability nor, surprisingly, in reproduction.

In contrast, farm consultants report engagement with farmers across a wide range of activities centred on animal health and farm productivity and this is demonstrated in Figure 6.
Farm consultants do believe that reducing animal health issues increases farm profitability but there is a disconnect in their view between animal health expenditure and increasing farm productivity and profitability. Rather, a key goal for the majority of consultants surveyed was the reduction in animal health expenditure and this was perceived as a major determinant of ‘consulting success’. Figure 7a shows a summary of what successful animal health interventions look like to the consultants surveyed: the emphasis is on reducing clinical disease and animal health costs and not on increasing profitability or productivity. Conversely, when asked to exclude spending implications, consultants increased the importance of profitability and production as indicators of successful animal health advice and this is shown in Figure 7b.

**Figure 6.** Summary of attitudes to the role of farm consultants in animal health on farm businesses from 25 farm consultants surveyed in 2014 as part of the Vetlife farm consultant survey. The figure shows the percentage of consultants that report particular areas as ones where farmers seek their engagement.
Success in animal health intervention is not perceived as increased profitability but rather as a reduction first and foremost in the amount spent. Moreover, the answers suggest that the majority of consultants surveyed do not believe that expenditure on animal health will increase farm profitability.

Consultants report that they interact with veterinarians on animal health matters on average four times every year although 24% report interacting twice or less per year. Generally, they believe that they have an average to fair working relationship with veterinarians with the need for greater communication between the two parties identified as a major limit on the present relationship. Interestingly, consultants put the emphasis on the veterinarians for increasing dialogue with 64% of consultants believing veterinarians should communicate more effectively and only 48% of consultants believing that their profession should communicate more with veterinarians. Correspondingly, 44% of consultants feel that veterinarians should aim to work in a partnership style with them but only 28% of consultants think that they should work in partnership with veterinarians. These findings are summarised in Figure 8.
Them and us: Understanding how farm consultants view the veterinary profession

30  Proceedings of the Society of Sheep and Beef Veterinarians of the NZVA and Cervetec

Figure 8. Summary of attitudes to the working relationship between veterinarians and consultants from 25 farm consultants surveyed in 2014 as part of the Vetlife farm consultant survey. 8a shows responses to the question: ‘How would you rate the quality of the working relationship with veterinarians’ and 8b summarises the changes that veterinarians and consultants need to make to improve work relationship.

Disappointingly, most consultants are ambivalent about taking steps to improve this relationship.

Conclusions

These results shed some light on the relationship between farm veterinarians and farm consultants. A common theme is a lack of common ground in the perception of where veterinary input and expertise is useful. The consultants surveyed see the prime role of the vet in terms of the prevention and treatment of disease and as experts in veterinary commodities but not as potential contributors to farm productivity and profitability. In contrast veterinary intervention is often seen as a cost to be controlled and veterinarians as having a vested interest in selling product and services. This creates a situation where consultants see veterinarians as working in opposition to their aims (reducing costs in order to maximise farm profitability) while veterinarians see the cost emphasis as a brake on investment to improve profitability through better animal health (Morris and McKay 2003).

Consultants also see their role as overlapping with many areas associated with veterinary activities on farm such as animal health and reproduction. The overlap in areas of influence together with the difference in the role of veterinary intervention – cost verse investment – create a tension between the two professions. Whilst consultants strongly report feelings of respect for veterinary expertise and knowledge they do not always believe that this is being directed for the benefit of farm profitability. Rather there is
distrust of veterinary motives because of the commercial linkage perceived between provision of advice and provision of goods and services by the veterinary profession. With the control of animal health expenditure as a key goal for farm consultants, veterinary argument that this expenditure represents an investment to improved animal health and so greater profitability are viewed with suspicion. Moreover, the differences lie not with the generic concept that improved animal health will increase farm productivity, which is generally accepted by the consultants surveyed, but with the specific instance where-ever the consultant is engaged as to whether a particular item of animal health expenditure will translate to increased productivity and increased profitability for this particular farm.

In this way, consultants tend to see veterinary intervention in anything other than treatment and prevention of infectious disease as a potential threat to their role in controlling farm expenditure and as competing for farm profits with other expenditure which may in their view have a greater potential profitability.

There is ambivalence amongst the consultants surveyed about making efforts to improve the working relationship with veterinarians. Whilst no consultants stated that they did not want to improve this, there is a clear expectation that it is the veterinary profession that needs to make more of an effort with better communication and team work. Further, the expectation that veterinarians are primarily concerned with treatment and prevention of disease and the lack of belief in animal health expenditure as an investment creates a situation where veterinarians are not perceived as key drivers of farm profitability but – worse-case scenario – rather as key detractors from it. Thus further veterinary involvement is not seen as a priority, being viewed either as marginal to further farm success or as a key cost to be controlled.

The use of telephone surveys to gather information about the attitudes and outlooks of a group of individuals has been critiqued by Groves (1990) and Wiersama (2010). However, their comments relate to situations where a representative sample of the wider population is approached and asked for their views on general topics with which they are not necessarily intimately conversant. The present survey was designed primarily as a qualitative investigation although with some quantitative output and specifically targeted full time farm consultants engaged with farmers on a daily basis. Although it was local in extent rather than national, the response rate was high (69%) and the answers received do reflect the genuine opinions of the survey group but any wider conclusions must be treated cautiously. The penetration of the target population is unknown as the number of practicing farm consultants in the survey area cannot be readily established as there is no regional breakdown of a central database of farm consultants within New Zealand. NZIPIM (New Zealand Institute of Primary Industry Management (pers comms). However, the selection criteria used by Cinta Research Ltd mean that while the consultants selected may not represent all the target population those selected are highly representative.

Moreover, telephone surveys can suffer from validity errors where respondents give answers that do not reflect their true opinions: either because they are unwilling to voice these or because the questionnaire design renders them unable to do so (ibid). The former is certainly a possibility given the conflicts that are present between the two professions. The latter can occur when there is insufficient time, or respondents become fatigued with the questionnaire process and give a quick answer in order to move onto the next question, rather than a more detailed and truthful response. In those questions where the answers were close to the mid-point the possibility of answer indifference remains.
The use of a professional independent research company helps to reduce these errors through the appropriate formulation and asking of questions while the emphasis made on confidentiality and anonymity and the small number of questions reduces reluctance and respondent fatigue. The survey was re-formulated a total of eight times and pilot tested on a smaller group of consultants with feedback evaluated and incorporated before final use.

Given these findings, improving this relationship will not be easy and the high proportion of extremely self-motivated and independently minded individuals in both professions is another factor. Consultants and veterinarians rely on similar sources of material for further professional development but none of the consultants surveyed selected tertiary study or further qualifications as a form of further professional development. The lack of exposure to these forums of critical evidence assessment, reliance on personal experience and the preponderance of sole practitioners without collegial support can easily create conflicts if anecdotal reportage is contrasted with the results of scientifically conducted trials and evidence based medicine (Vandeweerd et al. 2012). Although the latter is often limited or absent and if predictive framed in terms of risk and likelihood it remains a stronger guide to formulating policy and the back bone of modern best practice veterinary medicine (Cockcroft and Holmes 2003).

However, with both parties truly working for the same client there are grounds for optimism. A degree of humility from the veterinary profession about the reliability of the financial impact of animal health interventions and the likely sensitivity of this to external uncontrollable events such as weather and the human element, together with clear budgeting and explanation of costs are surely a pre-requisite as is further work with all industry stakeholders to develop better evidence for the impact of veterinary interventions on farm profitability. Conversely, there needs to be greater commitment from consultants towards wanting to improve the relationship and a realisation that if in the worst case, veterinarians are an expense to be controlled they are better within the management fold than outside it. More positively, if a better working relationship is developed then consultants may come to view veterinarians as partners with common and agreed targets and review structures in place towards increased animal health, welfare and then farm profitability.

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For formatting purposes, all original long URLs have been condensed using the ow.ly format.

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Them and us: Understanding how farm consultants view the veterinary profession