Comparison of farm performance between participants and non-participants in veterinary herd health management in the Netherlands

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To determine whether farmers enrolled in a veterinary herd health management (VHHM) program obtain better farm performance than farmers not enrolled. In September 2011, 5,000 randomly selected dairy farmers participating in a dairy herd information program received a questionnaire per email, asking whether they participated in VHHM. If so, the farmer was asked to indicate which topics where discussed during farm visits in what frequency. From all farmers information on milk production parameters (e.g. milk yield), fertility parameters (e.g. calving interval, number of inseminations per cow), and udder health (e.g. somatic cell count (SCC), % new high SCC) was available. Relations between VHHM and production characteristics of farms were analyzed using general linear models. Response rate of the questionnaire was 20% (1,013/5,000). There were 695 participants and 318 non-participants in VHHM. Most important VHHM topics were fertility (regular topic at 85.5% of the farms), milk production (55%) and udder health (56.7%). Participants had significantly more cows (83 versus 81) and significantly better milk yield (kg/cow/year) (8.591 versus 8.230), bulk milk SCC (cells/ml) (218,000 versus 226,000), and calving interval (days) (416 versus 419). They had however significantly more inseminations per cow (1.9 versus 1.8). Farmers participating in VHHM overall have better farm performance parameters. Whether the economic benefits weigh out the costs of VHHM is an important future research question.