

The EU's Animal Health Strategy: Improving prospects for the veterinary profession or just more red tape?

A renowned question at a vet school interview is 'so why do you want to be a vet?' The answer may be that the challenges and rewards of being a veterinary surgeon are appealing, or that a thirst for scientific knowledge combined with the prospect of working with animals and people attracts you to the profession. However, I doubt any prospective student has ever replied that they were inspired by the mass slaughter of livestock after the Foot and Mouth Crisis in 2001, or by watching a farmer's livelihood literally go up in flames. My own dreams about becoming a vet did not include the horrifying prospect of telling a farmer that his/her herd are infected with a notifiable disease.

The past decade has seen several diseases- including Foot and Mouth, Avian Influenza and Bluetongue- threaten the entire farming industry. This has had extensive effects both socially and economically on tourism, international relations, public health and food safety. Simultaneously, the trade of animals and animal products between countries has increased, as has the number of countries within the European Union. These factors combined produce the need for an extensive review of the European Commission's approach to animal health. The new Animal Health Strategy is a six-year plan focussing on the strategic management- and notably prevention- of risks to animal health. How will this strategy impact on the lives of vets within the UK?

The strategy has four main aims: to ensure a high level of public health and food safety, to support farming and the rural economy, and to promote better farming practices and animal welfare which minimises environmental impact. This is to be achieved via prioritisation of EU intervention, developing a more appropriate animal health framework, ensuring better prevention, surveillance and crisis preparedness and investing in innovative scientific research.

Each of these goals will have an impact on the veterinary industry. Generally, the strategy will bring more diverse job opportunities in the veterinary sector. Public health

and food safety already occupy a significant place in the profession, but this may increase. The strategy also suggests improved border controls, thus veterinary jobs may be created here. More jobs may be created in research, as part of the strategy is to invest in research into veterinary medicines (e.g. vaccines). It is hoped that the common response to a virus outbreak- which is to slaughter animals - can then be largely avoided. This method is unpopular with the general public and most animal industry professionals and is ethically questionable. By developing modern treatments and vaccines perhaps the effects of diseases will become less devastating.

Through improving farming practices- and by increasing partnership and communication at local, national and international levels- the EC aims to better control disease and thus improve welfare. Veterinary surveillance is a vital tool to implement this and future vets may work more closely with animal keepers to enhance disease control and bio security.

Perhaps one of the most important aims of the strategy is the intention to support farming and the rural economy. This may help attract new graduates into large animal practice. A current shortage of large animal vets has been reported and is perhaps partly due to the unstable and economically vulnerable farming industry. The strategy introduces the idea of providing incentives for farmers to implement preventative measures, rather than the old-fashioned method of only compensating them after a disease outbreak has occurred. It also hopes to improve communication and make disease issues more transparent. This may reduce public fear, avoiding panic reactions such as occurred with the drastic fall in poultry sales last year over bird-flu concerns.

There are many challenges to the success of the new strategy and perhaps the greatest of these will be finding the funding and human resources to achieve the necessary change. Also, measuring the success and monitoring the implementation of the strategy will be challenging. This will be the role of the new 'Animal Health Advisory Committee', which will also be responsible for giving strategic guidance when action is required. Assuming it does succeed, what will these changes mean to my own future career? Like many vet students I aspire to enter mixed practice when I graduate. If the strategy fulfils

its aims this may be easier to do, as a more prosperous farming industry would bring more farm work. Perhaps instead of cutting their losses and euthanasing sick animals, farmers may be able to afford more treatment and surgery. This would bring more variety and job satisfaction into large animal work. Also, better disease prevention will hopefully make outbreaks of disease less likely. If an outbreak of a notifiable disease should occur, better crisis preparedness should enable a swift and effective response, thus minimising impact. Hopefully, vets will also be more clear about their own particular role in these situations, as will other parties involved.

The new measures may mean that, as a new graduate, I will feel I have more support available to me and a clearer idea as to my own responsibilities. The strategy explicitly states that vets should receive more effective training in order to recognise the initial signs of disease, thus perhaps I will be better educated in order to achieve this. Also, my job description may be different as a future large animal practitioner than it would currently be. A significant amount of my time could be spent devising animal health plans with owners and getting more involved in farm management and husbandry practises.

It may be that the veterinary profession changes in the respect that vets will spend less time treating animals and more time filling in official paperwork (regarding farming practises, disease surveillance and animal identification). However, surely the fundamental endeavour of the veterinary profession is to prevent disease and improve animal welfare. I think that if the price to pay for this is a little more tedious paperwork, we should embrace the red tape!

Joy Agar