

Covid-19: 10 lessons from young farm vets

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for farm vets and their practices across the world, but how has the pandemic been seen by younger vets? **Annie Kerr** discusses

VETSALUS is a new global network of veterinary consultants working with food producers to improve animal health, welfare and sustainability.

As part of our networking activities, we recently encouraged younger members from Holland, France, New Zealand, Denmark and the UK to discuss how they have managed the current Covid-19 situation and how they think it will impact on their future careers in farm practice.

What did we learn?

1. Vets from all the countries represented in the group agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic will lead to a greater emphasis on One Health and that vets are ideally positioned for this opportunity, since they work at the intersection of human, animal and environmental health.

Vets are used to dealing with emerging infectious diseases and the epidemiology and testing surrounding them (eg, African swine fever, bluetongue, Schmallenberg). This has been useful as some farmers have turned

to vets for advice about Covid-19.

2. Individual countries have dealt with Covid-19 in different ways. In New Zealand, clear guidelines meant there was less time spent trying to interpret the regulations. Whereas in Holland, an ‘intelligent lockdown’ approach gave professionals and businesses more autonomy to decide what they were comfortable with. In France and Denmark, the lockdown was relatively strict, whereas in the UK, the lockdown was not as severe and there was some confusion about the interpretation of rules.

3. We have noticed that the pressures of isolation have been similar in different countries. Everyone felt lucky to be still working and have been more reliant on virtual meetings and phone calls to stay in touch with colleagues, family and friends.

For some younger vets, aspects of training have been put on hold due to not being able to accompany colleagues on farm because of social distancing measures. It has not always been easy, as Tanja from Denmark reported: ‘I am not thriving in isolation...I was forced to spend more time on out-of-work activities that I sometimes find hard to prioritise but this has given me a different view on my work-life balance and I think I can use this in the future.’

4. In all countries ‘working from home’ has become the new norm,



Examining a cow with added precautions



The Covid-19 pandemic will lead to a greater emphasis on One Health

with limited trips into the practice to minimise contact. In the UK and France, there have been similar furlough schemes, which has meant there is increased expectation on vets to undertake administrative tasks (since there are fewer secretarial staff). Eleanor in New Zealand said: ‘As a new grad I have to be more proactive in making sure I stay connected, which is not as easy when not sharing office space.’

In Holland, farmers are on the ‘critical jobs’ list so their children can attend school, whereas farm vets are not on this list – a situation that caused some controversy. In France, there was a government scheme to pay parents to stay at home to look after their children.

5. The work itself has not really changed for farm vets, but going into the farmhouse for a post-routine coffee is a thing of the past. There are likely to be more digital solutions in the future and a decreased need for face-to-face meetings. There has been an abundance of free e-learning CPD in

Annie Kerr graduated from the University of Liverpool in 2017. She spent 18 months working in mixed practice in Cumbria before moving to her current place of work at Paragon Veterinary Group, working within the farm team.

Other contributors to this piece were Paul Kirkwood, Alasdair Moffett, Sebastian Claessens, Eleanor Robertson, Tanja Nielsen and Nicolas Masset.

all countries which has been really beneficial.

6. All vets have found social distancing on farm practically challenging. Nicolas, a vet from France, said: 'As a young vet it is harder to ask farmers to wear a mask or step back...there is a huge responsibility not to be a vector' – everyone agreed this was a challenge.

At the start of the outbreak there was a lot of uncertainty surrounding how to effectively carry out procedures while social distancing. In the UK, some non-essential work (castrations, dehorning) were cancelled if a 2-metre distance could not be adhered to. Some of these procedures could not be left for too long due to welfare implications (misalliance, injuries from horns). In some cases, the decision was left up to the individual vet to decide if not carrying out the procedure was a welfare concern and if it could be carried out safely while maintaining social distancing.

7. Vet students at university have no longer been 'seeing practice' in all countries – a key part of their studies – so it has delayed graduation in some countries. This will delay their starting dates with new employers and so may lead to a short-term shortage of vets.

However, vets also anticipated that practices could be reluctant to take on new vets during this uncertain time, especially with the milk price being so volatile due to the restaurant and hospitality industry being closed down.

In New Zealand, over the calving

season (from late July onwards), locum vets can make up to 20 per cent of the workforce. The travel ban may well mean that there is a shortage of vets in New Zealand over this period so there is pressure on the government to allow vets to travel into the country for this purpose.

In Denmark and France, there has recently been a decreased popularity of working in agriculture and rural areas, coupled with a rise in veganism, making recruitment of farm vets already very challenging.

8. In France and the UK, there has been an increase in people wanting to buy animal produce directly from farms – this has been positive for farmers, but it is unclear if this trend will continue after Covid-19.

One vet from France observed that 'the public were more aware of dependence on food and farmers. Some local farmers selling milk and cheese have found the number of orders has increased'.

In New Zealand, agriculture is already a huge part of the economy so most people are already well connected with farming. In Holland, there has been an increase in Covid-19 cases in areas with intensive farming. This association has been made and it may negatively affect the way people view agriculture in the future.

9. All vets remain enthusiastic and optimistic about their future careers in production animal medicine, but they accept that, inevitably, there will be big changes.

Eleanor, a mixed vet, from New Zealand said she recognised that phone consulting 'definitely has a



Social distancing zones marked out for TB testing

place and is here to stay now'. At the same time, UK vets found that working from home could be very productive and expected that farm vets may be less likely to go back into the office full time in the future.

10. All agreed that the collateral effects of Covid-19 on employment, affluence, social networks and awareness of climate change will all have far-reaching impacts on agriculture that are difficult to disentangle from Covid-19 alone. ●



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