

Veterinarian challenges to providing a multi-agency response to farm animal welfare problems in Ireland: responding to the human factor

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Summary

In 2012, the authors undertook a study of the challenges facing government and private veterinarians in responding to the human element of farm animal welfare incidents (i.e. the personal problems and difficulties of farmers that can result in farm animal neglect). This paper reports their findings and examines the role of veterinarians in responding to the difficulties of farmers. It also looks at their experiences of attempting to build a multi-agency approach involving veterinary and human support services. This paper builds on a study whereby the authors considered how social, health and attitudinal factors, as well as mental health problems, contribute to farm animal welfare incidents in Ireland. An early warning system involving relevant agencies is in place to identify and prevent farm animal welfare problems before they become critical. The literature provides examples of private veterinarians combining with support services

where there are indicators of animal and human abuse. Yet there are no research examples of government or private veterinarians linking with support services to resolve farm animal welfare cases where there are social, health, and/or mental health difficulties with the herd owner. Four focus groups were conducted with government veterinarians ($n = 18$) and three with private veterinarians ($n = 12$). Government veterinarians made contact with support services to seek advice on how best to respond to the human element of farm animal welfare incidents, and/or to seek support for the herd owner. Contact between government and private veterinarians was driven by the former. Communication between agencies was influenced by individual efforts and personal contacts. Formal structures and guidelines, perceived professional capabilities in determining herd owner needs, and client confidentiality concerns among support services and private veterinarians were less influential. The fear of losing clients and the financial implications of this were also cited by private veterinarians. Family, neighbours and local support groups assisted in reaching an on-farm solution. The paper concludes with the requirements for a multi-agency approach in Ireland: the provision of tailored information and guidelines targeting government and private veterinarians and support services, and a comprehensive structure for relationship-building, planning, and cross-reporting between all the relevant agencies.

Keywords

Abuse – Animal hoarding – Animal welfare – Confidentiality – Early warning system – Farm animal welfare – Farmer welfare – Government veterinarian – Human element – Ireland – Mental health – Neglect – Private veterinarian – Qualitative research – Support services.

Introduction

In 2004, an early warning system (EWS) was established in Ireland, after recommendations by the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council. This EWS involves the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), the Irish Farmers' Association, and the Irish

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA). It provides a framework which seeks to identify and prevent farm animal welfare problems before they become critical. Despite the EWS, on-farm animal welfare problems continue to occur (1, 2). In response, the authors of this paper undertook an exploratory study in 2012, to identify the human elements, issues and problems that contribute to farm animal welfare incidents. Interviews with herd owners revealed social, health and attitudinal factors associated with age-related difficulties, the availability of farm help, and differing perceptions of acceptable standards of animal welfare, as well as mental health problems and the prevailing levels of stress (C. Devitt, P. Kelly, M. Blake, A. Hanlon & S.J. More, paper A, submitted). Government and private veterinarians reported physical and social isolation among herd owners, as well as addiction and mental health problems, including depression. Government veterinarians reported three areas in which they faced dilemmas when responding professionally to farm animal welfare cases that involved problematic human factors. These included defining the professional parameters of their role, determining the appropriate response, and balancing involvement versus detachment (C. Devitt, P. Kelly, M. Blake, A. Hanlon & S.J. More, paper B, submitted).

The importance of a multi-agency approach to animal welfare

Relevant agencies that should be involved in implementing a multi-agency approach include animal welfare groups and bodies involved in human health, mental health, housing support, law enforcement, sanitation and environmental protection (3). Veterinary practitioners and farmer organisations should also be included in a multi-agency approach to farm animal welfare.

A multi-agency approach makes early intervention and short- and long-term change for animal owners easier, reducing the potential for repeated animal welfare offences and providing ongoing monitoring and support (3, 4). A multi-agency approach can provide an educational and consultative role for local people and organisations

who wish to help, including those in the veterinary profession. Links between such groups must be set up before a crisis occurs. Information campaigns should be run as early as possible, and rural groups trained to act as ‘sign-posters’ to help identify ‘at-risk’ individuals (5, 6). Multi-agency roles, when coordinated, can serve as a ‘carrot’ rather than a ‘stick’, supporting the animal owner in overcoming the welfare crisis rather than punishing him or her after the event (7).

Challenges to a multi-agency approach include an inability of some veterinary professionals to recognise their responsibility to join with support services or their legal obligation to report deliberate animal abuse (8, 9). Veterinarians and other professionals may also be wary of calling in other organisations because of worries about litigation or driving the client away, or a fear for client safety (10, 11, 12). Conflicting roles and a lack of agreement about policies and actions can undermine cooperation (3, 8). In implementing a coordinated approach, effective and clear guidelines, education, tolerance, planning, and relationship-building between agencies are all essential (3, 6, 11, 13).

The potential role of veterinarians in contributing to a multi-agency approach

Veterinarians are often in ideal positions to advise on animal welfare, due to their relationship with their clients and animals, and their position of trust in the community (14, 15, 16). Animal abuse often occurs as an extension of other sorts of abuse (such as domestic violence, child abuse etc.). As a result, increasing emphasis is being placed on veterinarians combining with support services as a means of addressing animal and human welfare (10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20). There is greater attention being paid to the ways in which veterinarians can work with support services if they suspect that their clients may be being abused. For example, the Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative (DAVI) in Scotland helps veterinarians who treat companion animals to ‘notice changes in someone’s appearance or behaviour’ and to

recognise that, 'by expressing concern, vets could give an abused client the confidence to seek help' (19).

Through such initiatives, veterinarians involved in primary care must be given the skills and professional confidence to refer clients to appropriate services. It is well known that many domestic abusers also abuse their victim's pets/companion animals as part of the abuse regime. However, in one Irish study, 12% of private veterinarians felt that they had no available mechanism to assist their clients when dealing with non-accidental injury in companion animals; and only 5% referred the client to a support agency (11). Helpful interventions by the veterinary profession must include the ability to ask questions and undertake accurate assessments. This needs to be supported by appropriate training and education, enabling veterinarians to recognise danger signs, and to feel confident in responding (11, 18, 20).

The role of government and private veterinarians in Ireland

In Ireland, government veterinarians contribute to DAFM endeavours, ensuring compliance with food safety, animal health, and animal welfare regulations in food animal production. In terms of farm animal welfare, government veterinarians are empowered by the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 to issue 'welfare notices' to farmers, when the animal welfare standards on their farm do not comply with the regulations. These notices provide a prescriptive structure to farmers, indicating actions that must be taken to resolve animal welfare problems on their farm.

The Veterinary Council of Ireland (VCI) is the statutory regulatory body controlling the veterinary profession in Ireland. The VCI's Code of Professional Conduct (2012) describes the role of private veterinarians in animal welfare. In particular, it clearly emphasises the obligation of the veterinarian to report cases of animal neglect and/or abuse to the relevant authorities, 'if the situation shows no sign of being remedied and the animal is still suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress' (21).

Though confidentiality to the client is obligatory throughout the Code, confidentiality agreements can be overcome. This can occur when veterinarians need to provide information to professional veterinary colleagues involved in the case, when there is obligation under the law, or when it is considered that the public interest or the animal's welfare is endangered to such an extent that it outweighs the professional obligation to the client. Unfortunately, this type of reporting does not always occur. In one study (P. Flanagan, unpublished study, 2007), only 3% of 494 farm animal welfare incidents were reported to government veterinarians by private veterinarians.

Study objectives

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of government and private veterinarians when they tried to form links with each other and with support services to address farm animal welfare incidents that involved the herd owner having some kind of social, health or mental health problems or difficulties. It is envisaged that the results will promote further research and discussion of the relationship between the problems of the herd owner, the maintenance of animal welfare standards, and the ways in which relevant agencies can respond usefully and appropriately.

Methodology

Study design

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee. There is growing recognition in the animal sciences of the importance of developing an interdisciplinary approach with the social sciences (22, 23). In this study, qualitative focus groups were used (24). This approach was particularly helpful in encouraging veterinarians to share their various experiences and perspectives, since they are often isolated from their colleagues during their everyday work.

Participant recruitment and response

Government veterinarians (there were a total of 118 who would have been eligible to take part in this study) were recruited through the 16 District Veterinary Offices (DVOs) located nationwide. Obstacles encountered when recruiting private veterinarians to participate reflected the sensitive nature of the research (25) – namely, the topic of farm animal welfare in the context of private veterinarian–client relationships. Contact was made with the Veterinary Council of Ireland (the national regulatory body) and Veterinary Ireland (the national representative body) to seek their assistance with recruiting private veterinarians. A snowball technique was used, whereby key members identified other interested private veterinarians. Willing private veterinarians then contacted the research team. In total, 30 veterinarians took part, comprising 18 government veterinarians (four focus groups), and 12 private veterinarians (three focus groups). All participants had a number of years of experience in the veterinary field.

Focus group topics

Focus group questions centred on the participants' experiences of farm animal welfare incidents that involved difficulties with the farmer, the ways in which they responded to such incidents, and their attempts to bring about an on-farm solution.

Data analysis

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Any identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia) was used in the data analysis process. Thematic network analysis was also used (26); that is, the multi-stage development of a series of organising and global themes to reflect the meaning of the data. These global themes form the basis of the results section. Inter-rater reliability of the themes was reached through agreement between the first author and a second researcher, who was not involved in the study.

Results

Reasons for interaction between government and private veterinarians, and support services

The need for advice and assistance to reach an on-farm solution

Ten government veterinarians explicitly reported making contact with support services, to seek advice on how best to respond to the people involved (the ‘human element’) in a farm animal welfare incident, and/or to seek some form of assistance for the herd owner. It was often considered necessary to link up with other services to improve the animals’ welfare, while ensuring the continued safety of the herd owner. In most reported instances, these attempts to reach out to other services were unsuccessful.

‘If I could get [the herd owner] on a social welfare payment... I would solve his problems, he will never make money out of farming... the longer he does what he is doing; the animals will suffer. I made an effort to contact social welfare, but I ran into a dead end.’
(*Government Veterinarian or GV*)

‘We were about to remove cattle from him [the herd owner]. I was afraid there would be a bad outcome... I was discreet about the information I was giving about [the herd owner’s situation]. I made a couple of phone calls one day, they would ring me back, but I never heard anything more about it.’ (*GV*)

No private veterinarian reported contacting other support services. Government veterinarians put forward recommendations on providing a support person whom they could contact, to obtain information on how best to proceed with a potentially complex human situation:

‘Someone we could phone and talk to, when we think [the herd owner] isn’t a straight animal welfare problem. We’re only able to deal with the animal welfare, we can’t deal with the human side of it.’
(*GV*)

In addition, government and private veterinarians recommended the development of a resource list of support contacts for themselves and for herd owners experiencing difficulties. Exemplifying this need, one private veterinarian explained: 'I would have loved to have had a list of resources that I could have given [the herd owner], if he needed... he would have had something at hand, and somebody could sit him down, confidentially, help him... maybe talk through with him issues that he's going through mentally.' (*Private Veterinarian or PV*)

The involvement of government veterinarians in promoting herd owner compliance

Both groups acknowledged the value and potential for closer interactions between government and private veterinarians. However, in general, it was the government veterinarians who initiated contact, to obtain information about the herd owner and the veterinary care provided. This reflects the regulatory role of the government veterinarian and the requirement to resolve a farm animal welfare problem by contacting the relevant parties, such as the private veterinarian. Only two private veterinarians reported initiating contact with government veterinarians. Involving government veterinarians early on in potential farm animal welfare cases provided an effective means of encouraging on-farm compliance: 'you can't achieve much without a serious threat from the DVO to the herd keeper, that if he doesn't improve his welfare, it may mean that his animals will be removed'.

Factors that determined contact between veterinarians and support services

Individual efforts

Government veterinarians explained that their contact with support services was determined by their own individual efforts and personal contacts. This took place in the absence of any formal structure. As a result, communication between these professionals varied widely and the response was often erratic. Successful contact depended on the specific individual who was in the position at that particular time:

‘[As] regards social welfare and engagement with [health service providers], what happens is determined by how much knowledge and interaction we have with personal contacts within these organisations. We’d frequently ring the GP [General (Medical) Practitioner]. How you get on depends on the GP. Some of them will engage with you because they see what you’re trying to do to improve the situation of their client. Some will take a strong view of confidentiality between doctor and client. Most of them will run with you to try to improve the situation... they themselves know there are issues with the people you’re dealing with.’ (GV)

In (only) one instance, the government veterinarian encountered a medical support contact who ‘advised me what to do’ when the veterinarian received a text from a herd owner, indicating an intention to commit suicide: ‘it was comforting to have the contact that I could talk to in the emergency situation.... because I wasn’t prepared for that [reference to suicide].’ (GV)

Perceived professional capabilities in determining herd owner needs

Much discussion was had on whether or not government and private veterinarians have a responsibility to assist the herd owner and, if so, what this assistance should involve. Concern was raised by government veterinarians, in particular, about their own professional capability to determine the herd owner’s support needs. For example, as one government veterinarian explained: ‘while we have a responsibility to the farmer, to ensure that nothing we do is going to worsen things for him in some way – I’m not qualified to help that farmer.’ (GV)

Though these concerns exist, it was clear from participant discussions that some level of human support was already being provided to herd owners in crisis, and attempts were being made to link in with other support services.

For private veterinarians, there was less agreement on their having any responsibility to contribute towards human care. Some private

veterinarians explicitly agreed that they'd never considered that there was any potential within their role to contribute in this way: 'though we've encountered some very sad people in our work, to be honest, I never considered that we could have any input on this [contributing to human care], or with linking in with anyone else that could help the farmer.' (PV)

Client confidentiality

Government veterinarians cited confidentiality concerns as the reason they were given to explain the lack of cooperation from support services. All private veterinarians identified client confidentiality as a barrier to increasing collaboration with government veterinarians and other agencies.

One private veterinarian maintained: 'when I'm called in to a farm [then] I'm called in for a specific reason, to do one thing... I'm not called in to survey the whole place and come out with my decision. I can't talk about this place. When you go into a place, you're expected to be confidential about what's there.' (PV)

Citing the need for confidentiality, this veterinarian confirmed that the 'best thing is to get a family member involved. I'd be reluctant to contact a GP. Confidentiality.' (PV)

Confidentiality concerns are bolstered by the fact that private veterinarians are financially dependent on their clients. Disclosing information to third parties could place this financial relationship at risk: 'It's not easy to go into a farmer to say you are not looking after your cows well. I'm not going to risk my livelihood.' 'We need to get paid, so we tend to look after our clients too much.' (PV)

The following statements reflect the level of separation between government veterinarians and support services, emphasising this perceived need for confidentiality:

'We tried to consult with [the health service provider] – they claim confidentiality. I drive in the back gate to get the cattle sorted. The [health service provider] are driving in the front gate to get the kids

sorted. None of us are consulting, which is such a big gap in what could be done. It's so frustrating. We've made a couple of phone calls to the [health service provider] about it, with a view to a joint approach. We've been rebuffed.' (GV)

'[The health service provider] don't ring back. If they do ring, they say it's confidential, and they can't talk about the person. If I was a non-professional I'd understand, but we are professionals, and we are expected to act in a professional manner too. We have phoned and left messages, they're not in and eventually when they do come back [to us], they say they can't talk about their clients.' (GV)

These experiences accumulate to affect the willingness of government veterinarians to seek guidance and support in responding to complex farm situations. There was uncertainty among the participants about how best to proceed with building a communication framework between both government and private veterinary roles, in a way that would not jeopardise client confidentiality or the financial nature of the private veterinarian-client relationship: 'In an idealistic world the vets would report the human side of it to the GP and they'd get cross-referencing and all, it would be lovely. But with confidentiality issues, I don't know how it would work.' (GV)

Helpful factors when dealing with the human aspect of farm animal welfare

Help from family members and neighbours

Government veterinarians outlined the beneficial role of individuals, who are in close contact with the herd owner's situation. These people play an important role in providing support to the herd owner, and include family members, neighbours and local GP services. In some examples, they were the first to notify the government veterinarian of a problem:

'In the last 18 months we're getting calls, more so, from neighbouring farmers of the individual... I've had four calls this year from direct family relatives, asking could I visit and improve the situation.' (GV)

‘I went into a situation where the [herd owner] was on his knees, snivelling and crying and big red face, and four kids, and 40 of his animals dead, lying around the place. Two of his neighbours had asked me to come in...’ (GV)

Similarly, neighbours and family members were often contacted by government veterinarians to assist in resolving the situation. This was because of their familiarity with the farm, and their relationship with the herd owner. ‘Neighbours naturally see a lot of discrepancy in the herd, if animals aren’t accounted for’; ‘... you get [the neighbour] in to help, he might be someone [the herd owner] went to school with, he has entry into his house and his trust.’ (GV)

Similar approaches, though to a much lesser extent, were identified by private veterinarians in situations where an emotional interaction had occurred with the herd owner. ‘I spoke to [the herd owner’s] sister in confidence and advised that the man visits the doctor’; ‘best thing is to get a family member involved’, and ‘If it need be, I’d bring in a family member, to help with the situation.’ (PV)

The inclusion of a family member was identified as one way of overcoming confidentiality barriers.

The role of local support services

In four instances, it was reported that the local psychiatrist and GPs had contacted government veterinarians. Government veterinarians reported that local support services were regarded as providing greater accessibility and trust between government veterinarians, service providers, and herd owners. These local services offered greater sensitivity towards the complexities of individual farm cases.

‘If you go to [rural location], there’s probably a Dr [name] there who is 63, and he knows every fellow in the place, there the day they were born and he drank whiskey in the house, the whole lot. That’s one situation, which is unfortunately dying out. You go to [urban locations] – and the chances of finding the GP, as the guy who knows everything about Farmer John – I wouldn’t bet on it. That’s what we

found recently. The doctor who was on a half day wouldn't answer his phone, and the next day he was too busy, and that farmer lost...' (GV)

When asked about the potential for linking up with the Health Service Executive (HSE), the government health service provider, participants raised concerns about the level of separation, potential for 'disconnects' and lack of trust between distant support services and situations with individual herd owners. In circumstances where social support services become involved (in family protection, for example), recommendations were made for a more collaborative approach between the services: 'I would like some [health service provider] person to feed this information to us [when a herd owner/herd owner's family is making use of social services]... because we're still dealing with this farmer. He's still being dealt with by [health service provider], and we're doing it on the farm: two parallel tracks.' (GV)

A collaborative approach would assist the government veterinarian in how to respond to the farm animal welfare situation, without jeopardising the well-being of the herd owner.

Government and private veterinarians acknowledged the fact that, despite the potential role of local services, a structure is required for confidential cross-reporting, without undermining client confidentiality. Recommendations were made for stronger links between government and private veterinarians, in a way that does not jeopardise the relationship of the private veterinarian with their client.

Discussion

Overview

The EWS brings together various agencies, to provide a collaborative approach to tackling farm animal welfare incidents. The HSE, the government agency responsible for the provision of healthcare throughout Ireland, is also involved, on a pilot basis, in a number of regions. In addition to an agreement on protocol, there is a concerted effort among the senior managers of DAFM and HSE to advance the EWS.

At the time of research, however, local initiation and participation by the HSE depended upon local commitment and interest, rather than being seen as a core central strategic objective in which it was vital to participate. Efforts were also being made to extend involvement in the EWS to other potentially relevant agencies, such as An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police), the Local Authority Veterinary Service and the Private Veterinary Practitioners.

In 2012, the authors of this paper identified social, health and mental-health difficulties experienced by herd owners that had contributed to farm animal welfare incidents in Ireland (C. Devitt *et al.*, paper A, submitted). Focus groups were conducted with government and private veterinarians, to gather their experiences of responding to such farm animal welfare incidents. Evidence from this study shows that veterinarians seek to assist the herd owner as well as alleviating farm animal suffering. However, this creates dilemmas as the responsibility to provide care for the animals is often blurred with responding empathetically to human needs. A multi-agency approach incorporating veterinarian and social support provides a professional structure for responding to both animal and human needs (C. Devitt *et al.*, paper B, submitted). Despite the efforts of the EWS, the results presented in this paper reveal real challenges to providing a multi-agency approach to the human aspect of farm animal welfare problems.

These challenges can be summarised as:

- the lack of a proper structure for providing advice and cross-reporting between government and private veterinarians, and between veterinarians and support services
- perceived financial risks by private veterinarians
- inconsistent involvement from health and social support professionals
- a lack of professional confidence, particularly felt by government veterinarians – this is related to an absence of information, guidance or direction on how to respond appropriately to farm animal welfare

issues that involve the mental health, social or physical health problems of the herd owner.

In reviewing the literature and the results, there are two key areas that are central to providing a multi-agency approach to farm animal welfare in Ireland, when the problems and issues of the herd owner add to the difficulties:

- the provision of tailored information and guidelines targeting government and private veterinarians, and support services
- a comprehensive structure for planning, building relationships and confidential cross-reporting between relevant agencies.

Providing information and guidelines for private and government veterinarians, and support services

The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium provides a series of intervention tools for assessments, professional approaches and the establishment of multidisciplinary task forces (<http://vet.tufts.edu/hoarding/harc.htm>). Information is provided for therapists, for family and friends, for prosecutors, and for large-scale animal rescue.

The Consortium's research suggests that tailored information campaigns would be useful to raise awareness of the human aspects of animal welfare problems, using accessible language for the agencies involved. This would emphasise the benefit of a multi-agency approach, while recognising the individual responsibilities and roles of the various professionals involved, and listing 'warning signs' of the social, health and mental health problems of the herd owner that may be contributing to or exacerbating farm animal welfare issues. In addition, it would reassure all those involved of a professional commitment to confidential cross-reporting, while giving full weight to the veterinarian's responsibilities to farm animal welfare, and their duty to report.

To support the recommendations made in this paper, the creation of a helpline card, similar to that mentioned in Lobely *et al.* (5), would be

beneficial for all involved. This could be provided to herd owners who are experiencing difficulties. Some of the issues reported in this paper may not be anticipated by newly trained veterinarians. There is a need to emphasise the human element of farm animal welfare to new graduates. Exposure to the various support options and initiatives for farmers and their families will help veterinarians to be better prepared and to respond appropriately, when the situation arises.

The authors recommend that guidelines be provided for professional groups, where there is potential for a blurring of the lines between the provision of care to humans and caring for animals (C. Devitt *et al.*, paper B, submitted). In the Code of Professional Conduct (for private veterinarians), there is reference to contacting the Irish Police, the DVO and the Local Authority Service. However, there is no reference to how and when private veterinarians should link up with other agencies, such as social support services, when addressing farm animal welfare. There is little guidance about client-related circumstances where the veterinarian can clearly see that the herd owner has social, health or mental health problems. Government veterinarians are guided by an internal DAFM welfare manual; yet there is no reference in this to contacting the HSE.

Guidelines should provide practical advice to the relevant agencies on how to establish communication channels for cross-reporting between veterinarians and support services (27). In this study, government veterinarian comments about farm situations reflected the considerable empathy that they have for these farmers, and their professional fears about trying to ensure the most appropriate response and best outcome for the herd owner and the animals (see also Devitt *et al.*, paper B, submitted). The development of guidelines on appropriate responses must include all stakeholders and realistically be able to be implemented (28). The development of appropriate guidelines according to the professional's individual role and responsibilities would help to build trust between the professional and his/her client, as well as providing them with the confidence to take appropriate action. These guidelines should incorporate the

responsibilities of government and private veterinarians, farming groups and social and health service providers.

Numerous initiatives in veterinary care show how veterinary roles can be linked in with those of other support agencies. For example, as mentioned earlier, the DAVI initiative launched in Scotland helps veterinarians to identify domestic abuse when they meet clients while providing treatment to their companion animals (20). Initiatives such as DAVI could be adopted and adapted for use by private veterinarians during farm visits. Similarly, those engaged in providing social, health and psychological support should be given the relevant information and tools to:

- help herd owners accessing support services who may be experiencing difficulties on the farm
- assess, within their professional capacity, the animal welfare situation on their farms.

The need for structure to make a multi-agency approach easier

Communication between government and private veterinarians and with other agencies is erratic. Any inter-agency communication that does take place is prompted by individual efforts, rather than a formal structure. However, private veterinarians can play an important role in community health interventions (6, 10). McGuinness *et al.* (11) reported that private veterinarians had only low levels of referring their clients to support services in cases where non-accidental injury was apparent in their companion animals.

In this study, no attempt was made by private veterinarians to contact support services to assist with the difficulties being experienced by their farmer clients, within the wider context of farm animal welfare. Private veterinarians were concerned about client confidentiality and financial risk to their own practices. These barriers, in addition to other fears, are also cited in the literature on the role of veterinarians in reporting suspected cases of human abuse (such as domestic violence and child abuse) to social services (10, 11, 17).

Difficult questions come into play when examining the obligations of private veterinarians to act on behalf of their clients, and the welfare of farm animals. However, it must be remembered that there is a moral duty to animal patients and the needs of society. This moral duty is recognised as a veterinary activity by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

In developing a structured approach, there must be provisions for private and government veterinarians to disclose information, without jeopardising their professional duties and client relationships. Arrangements must ensure that veterinarians can fully carry out their professional role, in terms of treating animals and safeguarding their welfare, while at the same time being able to call upon the relevant support services available for the farmer.

A multi-agency approach should facilitate good relations, tolerance, and trust between agencies. It should also allow for cross-reporting and planning, so that a human and/or animal welfare crisis can be foreseen and prevented (3). In this study, attempts to contact support services were often made at a time of crisis on the farm. At this point, the herd owner may have specific needs, and a sensitive, informed approach may be required by the veterinarian and support services to respond appropriately to the situation.

Locally grounded sources of support, including family and neighbours, have been identified in this paper and in other studies as being particularly important to the farmer (5, 6). These sources of support should be recognised as key anchors in the community. Yet, in earlier work, the authors of this paper found that herd owners were often reluctant to ask for assistance because of a feeling they should show resilience, an inability to talk openly about their problems and a fear of stigma. Help from the neighbours was not always available in areas of rural decline (C. Devitt *et al.*, paper A, submitted). Thus, in such areas of rural decline and social isolation, multi-agency approaches to farm animal welfare may need to identify and include alternative sources of local support (5).

Conclusion

There appears to be a dearth of research on a multi-agency approach to address the relationship between adverse animal welfare incidents on farms and any social, health or mental health difficulties that might be being experienced by the herd owner. This is despite the growing recognition of the role of Veterinary Services in contributing to human care. This paper presents the current challenges being experienced, particularly by government veterinarians. In essence, the ultimate goal for private and government veterinarians is to maintain animal welfare standards. A comprehensive, inclusive multi-agency approach will provide a mechanism for this goal to be achieved.

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