

## **AGRARIAN RENAISSANCE: COULD IT GET VETS BACK ON TO FARMS?**

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**Justin Armstrong** discusses whether there is a novel alternative to the traditional farmer and vet partnership

**IT is getting harder to make a living in farming these days, and, perhaps, harder still to make one in the veterinary profession. As the exodus of smaller farms from the sector continues, and “efficient” supermarket farms replace them, so the opportunities for the small rural vet dwindle.**

With a poor work/life balance, the increasing financial costs of running a practice and the growth of both corporate competitors and online pharmacies, it is little wonder the vet feels threatened. Added to this, ongoing policy changes have rewritten the relationship between government, livestock owners and vets in private practice. The rural vet was once, effectively, a regulator for the Government. Today, he or she is increasingly seen as a partner – as someone to advise and educate the farmer, who is now viewed as having the primary responsibility for the welfare of their animals.

Yet, veterinary medicine remains a popular choice for young people, and there are an increasing number of registered vets in the UK and from overseas. The overall effect is that supply may outstrip demand, reducing further the opportunities for young vets to gain and develop much-needed experience and expertise on the farm. Vets have been slow in promoting their public good functions – such as work in animal welfare, public health and biosecurity – to the wider public.

They have allowed the image of James Herriot buzzing around the Yorkshire Dales in an Austin Seven, repairing “broken” cows, to live on too long. These and other factors, such as counter urbanisation, have led to a shift towards companion animal care, and even the abandonment of farm animal practice. However, a novel approach to farming offers the potential for entrepreneurial vets to get back on to the farm – and to reconnect with the community.

## **Reconnecting people, land and food**

Tim Waygood farms 175 acres of previously set-aside land in Ardeley, northern Hertfordshire. In addition, there are 30 acres of woods, eight acres of new orchard and eight acres of organic vegetable garden. His livestock includes red poll cattle, black Welsh mountain and Lleyn sheep, outdoor-reared British lop and Berkshire pigs, and a wide variety of poultry. He has a farm shop and café, where he sells his produce direct to the customer and also by mail order at supermarket prices.

More than this, though, he encourages people on to his land to develop their own business enterprises. Tim’s philosophy is based on five founding insights:

- Food and farming must change.
- Margins, people and knowledge exist.
- Reach out to customers.
- Come on my farm: services, partnerships, rural hubs and rural care.
- If it can be done once...

His intention is to reconnect people, land and food through two approaches – an agrarian renaissance movement (ARM) and agrarian renaissance enterprise (ARE). Both approaches draw from existing cooperative movements, such as the industrial and provident societies (IPS). Briefly, the idea is to benefit the IPS members and the broader community through sustainable trade. Although each ARM member may hold share capital in the enterprise, it is in the form of par-value shares that are only redeemable at face value – rather than equity shares that appreciate or depreciate depending on the success of the enterprise.

The shares are a membership ticket to the enterprise and give each member one vote. The broader community benefits through the availability of highquality food at “supermarket prices” and other services. The ARE benefits its members by encouraging and facilitating social enterprises operating from the farm (the rural hub) that can be replicated elsewhere (for instance, social franchising).

These enterprises can include market gardening, forestry, crafts, education and training – in fact, anything that benefits the community and reconnects society to the farm without damaging the environment. It is here that the opportunity exists for the entrepreneurial vet.

## **Resident vet**

Like many farmers, Tim Waygood has ambivalent views about veterinary surgeons and their fees. Although he regards the vet as an essential element in his livestock's health and welfare, veterinary fees – especially for drugs – can seriously reduce already slender profit margins. However, he is also aware and concerned some veterinary services may not be available in the future – for example, emergency provision and the continuity of care offered by the local vet. In partnership with the RVC, Tim and the ARM are pioneering new models for farm vets.

One such model that Tim believes provides a “win-win” solution to the farmer, the community and, of course, the vet is the concept of the farm community or resident vet. Briefly, how this works is that, in return for up to 20 hours or so of farm veterinary provision, the vet would receive a negotiable retaining fee and accommodation. This is not an employed position – rather, it is an example of social enterprise.

A social enterprise is a business driven primarily by social and environmental objectives, rather than profits for shareholders. In addition, the vet would have premises – including a small laboratory and dispensary – as well as other business support services from a laptop to help with accounts, health and safety and human resources. The vet could then develop a practice from the farm base to serve the needs of local farms and the community; this could include a GP service, lectures and training.

Agrarian Renaissance has a clear brand identity and aims to encourage and facilitate AREs (social enterprises, of which the resident vet is one) by licensing brands, systems, methodologies, teams and models. Thus, the resident vet will be one of a number of AREs on the farm working under the brand name.

He or she would, of course, be the only veterinary enterprise. This is an example of social franchising whereby the Agrarian Renaissance brand is offered to other enterprises to widen the impact and replicate the model elsewhere. In contrast to the traditional franchise business model, a social franchise has looser networks and partnerships that allow the social enterprise to grow more rapidly with lower risks.

Thus, a major attraction of this model to the entrepreneurial vet is that it requires no capital and is of low risk. Furthermore, the vet has the opportunity to work with a wide variety of animals and, thus, develop all-round expertise. The farm and community benefit from the vet's presence, his or her continuity of care and his or her all-important local knowledge.

## Local expert

Vets play a pivotal role in public health and biosecurity. The importance of veterinary expertise and knowledge is of cogent interest to government in the aftermath of public controversies such as BSE and foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). Indeed, DEFRA has identified significant knowledge gaps in veterinary expertise necessary to maintain biosecurity and deal with animal disease breakdowns.

It is apparent from DEFRA's own studies that veterinary expertise is a contested concept and, importantly, who the public consider to be a veterinary expert is often at odds with the Government's opinion. For example, when reflecting local experiences during and after the FMD outbreak of 2001, veterinary opinion and advice on the ground was often regarded to be more credible and trustworthy by the media, local government and the general public than any guidance from central government and the old State Veterinary Service (SVS).

Society discriminates between different levels and types of expertise and makes value judgements based on a variety of criteria. These include trust, familiarity, complexity and the perceived value to society. Regarding veterinary expertise, I would suggest the elements of trust and familiarity are the most important to the public when making value judgements about a vet's expertise and social good.

The essential characteristic of the resident vet is that he or she is a GP. Therefore, he or she would have the ability to provide the three Ps and the three Cs. These are the provision of primary care, preventive care, patient-centred care, continuing care, comprehensive care and community care to animals and their clients. In addition, the role of patient and client advocate, case manager and gatekeeper to other specialist services can be added.

Over time, the resident vet would gain excellent local knowledge of the social structure and demographics of his or her community. Therefore, the resident vet would have the opportunity to gain the trust of the community being served, not only through a technical competency but also through a local knowledge and understanding.

## Can it work?

Arguably, the "traditional" rural vet provides all the aforementioned services, and develops all-important knowledge and community trust. However, the sustainability of the rural general vet is not guaranteed. Agriculture and livestock still define the rural vet, yet agriculture is changing and the demand for the good all-rounder is gradually being replaced by the need for the specialist. Let me explain: the productivist phase of agriculture that dominated the post-war period was gradually replaced by the post-productivist phase in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

This is being replaced by a "new" productivist phase that demands ever-greater efficiencies from both livestock and people. The vet's role is moving away from that of a physician to an engineer,

where the laptop is now as important, if not more so, than the stethoscope, and where milk is seen as the by-product of birth. Farmers are now “food producers” – they, too, have embraced the zeitgeist of getting more out of less, and this reflects on their expectations of the vet who is becoming as involved with farm economics as with farm health.

Indeed, the two are inextricably linked – good health equals productivity and higher profits. Not that this is a bad thing – after all, even James and Siegfried would support the concept that farms need to be profitable and animals need to be healthy. Somehow, though, I just don’t think Herriot and Farnon would last long in today’s world. We have lost a whole generation of young farmers who do not believe they could make a living in agriculture and we are in danger of losing a generation of vets for the same reason.

The ARM might be part of the answer to the problem. The cost of setting up in practice or buying a partnership in the “traditional” way has risen dramatically, particularly with the property boom. Add to this student debt and, of course, a contracting market makes rural practice an uncertain bet. Better, then, the regular income from a corporate practice or the regular hours looking after Rover and Felix.

The social enterprise opportunity, however, minimises the risk at virtually zero cost, and provides both accommodation and a small retainer that will, at least, keep the wolves from the door. It also encourages the entrepreneurial vet to build a sustainable and profitable business that is supported by a network of common interests and values. The business model can and must be replicated for it to be successful and it is intended that more than 30 such AREs will be operational this year.

## **Lifestyle choice**

Although profitability is essential in any business, if it does not pay for itself then it isn’t going to happen. However, profit alone is not the driving force behind the agrarian movement – just as important is the quality of life that such an enterprise can offer.

This model promises to reconnect the farmer, the vet and the public back to the land. It offers the veterinarian security, variety and involvement in the local community.

The farmer benefits from the vet’s continuity and locality and the community benefits from high-quality food at affordable prices, as well as the provision of local veterinary expertise. The resident vet may not make a killing, but he or she can make a contented living.