

Building and assessing effective herd health planning

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Herd health planning is an essential part of any cattle farming business, but it is often underutilised and undervalued. To be effective it is not only important factors affecting herd performance are identified, but a clear plan is in place to reduce their impact.

Underpinning success is communication and the vet-farmer relationship. No health plan blueprint exists that is applicable to all farms, as each one is different. However, it is often overlooked that farmers differ in how they respond to different methods of communication and, therefore, adapting communication styles to suit the individual farmer is key to an effective outcome.

History of herd health planning

A herd health plan (HHP) is a document outlining the way health problems are to be monitored, treated and prevented to ensure the welfare of the animals in a cost-effective manner for the farm business (Sibley, 2000; 2006). The aim is to prevent disease and improve animal health and production through the establishment of long-term strategies to reduce disease at herd level. However, to achieve this there must be “agreement and common purpose” between the vet and farmer (Sibley, 2006).

HHPs have not always been so focused on the animals’ health. The idea of a physical HHP as a document was first introduced by the National Dairy Farm Assurance Scheme. The aim was to assure the quality of milk and associated products produced by cows with a sufficient level of health and welfare. However, more focus was on the infrastructure of the farm rather than the health parameters of the cows (Sibley and Orpin, 2014).

The novel concept of the HHP was reviewed in October 2013 and republished under the Red Tractor Assurance Scheme. With a greater focus on recording specific health events and using these to form the basis of a veterinary review, it has provided a great opportunity for farmers and vets to improve health, welfare, productivity and profitability on farms (Sibley and Orpin, 2014). However, going beyond the HHP itself and implementing change can still present a challenge.

Differing farmer and vet attitudes

Despite the revised scheme, the HHP itself is still viewed by many farmers as a red tape exercise necessary only to comply with assurance requirements, rather than one that could potentially benefit their business.

The importance of health planning is reflected in the changing role of the farm animal vet in the past 40 years, from the traditional “fire brigade” role to one more managerial or advisory in nature. This has particularly been the case in dairy farming due to the increased pressure to become more efficient in production (Brand et al, 1996).

While the HHP is a physical document, for herd health planning to be effective it needs to be an active and continuous process rather than something discussed on an annual basis only. However, the perception of the HHP itself and health planning management is often poor, as documented in the 2012 study by Hall and Wapenaar.

When it came to the usefulness of the HHP, 44% of farmers and vets involved in the study described it as a “useful document”, but 27% of vets and 16% of farmers listed it as a “useless document”. The remainder of vets mostly commented the HHP was potentially useful, that usefulness varied per client or was useful if kept up to date. These results clearly show a range in opinion on how an HHP can be used on farm to form the basis of a successful health monitoring

and prevention scheme.

The study also found while vets saw one of their roles being “an independent advisor”, farmers did not perceive them as such. It is clear health planning is unlikely to be effective without “agreement and common purpose” and the recognition by the farmer that the vet can fill the role of independent coordinator/advisor.

A change in how vets present themselves to clients may help to alter perceptions. While vets tended to favour a “friend of the farmer” style approach, the majority of farmers favoured a vet who was “a proactive person who could give technical advice”. However, the varying responses to how farmers would prefer their vets to approach working with them reflects the need for different communication methods for different types of farmers.

It has previously been shown certain communication strategies are influenced by the level of motivation a farm has and this is an important consideration when implementing herd health planning (Jansen et al, 2010).

Work by Scrasse et al (2016) further investigated the efficacy of current advisory strategies and found a number of factors influenced both the behaviour of the advising vet and the farmer seeking/receiving/implementing the advice. These include the farm itself (history, staff members, priorities and capacity to improve), the knowledge and experience of both the vet and farmer, and the personal and professional relationship between them.

Behind each of these different factors are a multitude of different values and attitudes towards key components of health planning, including disease control, changing current practices, the dairy cow herself and where vets sit in terms of their role in health planning.

Steps to success



Figure 1. The steps required to implement change on farm.

Cost-benefit arguments are often used as a tool to encourage the implementation of herd health

improvement strategies on farms. However, cost alone is an insufficient motivator for the majority of farmers. Inevitably, implementing changes requires increased time, effort and energy from the farmer and his or her team.

While the focus is predominantly the potential health benefits for the cow, it is important to remember, as a result, there could be detrimental effects to the farmer's health associated with increased workload. Therefore, understanding the behaviour of the farmer is key to helping him or her initiate and sustain changes (Higgins et al, 2012). When it comes to successfully implementing changes on farm, certain "stages" of behavioural change exist that a farmer must proceed through.

Figure 1 (Higgins et al, 2012) outlines these changes with success achieved through moving from left to right and failure from right to left.

As described by Higgins et al (2012), these four stages are:

- No intention to implement changes.
- Intention to change, such as willingness to start.
- Implementation of the change(s).
- Sustaining the change(s) over time.

At each point several factors are capable of influencing the behaviours of the farmer and whether he or she progresses to the next stage.

While the key determining factors are unknown, they are likely to depend on both the individual farmer and the change required. Some factors may be intrinsic to the farmer (for example, personality or age), while others may be extrinsic, such as financial, government or personal circumstances.

Assisting with change

The boxes at the bottom of **Figure 1** indicate the most important factors to consider when seeking to implement change on farm and where help may be required to ensure the farmer continues through the stages. However, before even beginning, it is important to appreciate the stage the farmer is at since the motivators for moving to the next stage will differ.

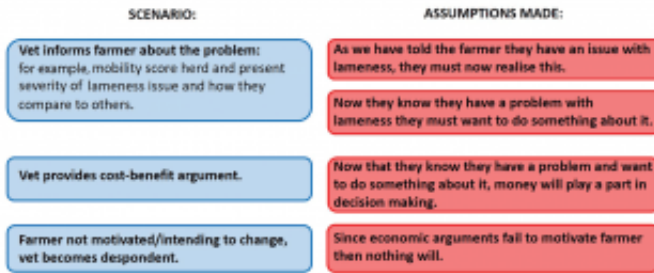


Figure 2. Assumptions often made when trying to motivate a farmer to change.

This was shown in a study by Ellis-Iverson et al (2010) when assessing the different motivators behind farmers implementing changes to control zoonotic diseases on farm. They found when farmers had no intention of implementing changes the financial benefit wasn't a key motivator, instead this is more important once the farmer has reached the "intention" stage, at which point the financial aspects may be key influencers in whether they move to the next step.

A common scenario when alerting a farmer to a problem on their farm is given in **Figure 2** (Higgins et al, 2012), with the assumptions made based on the actions of the vet and the farmer's response. This approach assumes the farmer wants to change, but if they aren't yet at this stage it can lead to frustration for the vet.

Assuming a farmer is always at the "no intention" stage, unless he or she has shown to be otherwise, is often the safest way of ensuring communication and discussions are constructive and avoid frustration for both parties (Higgins et al, 2012).

HHP in motion

It is clear health planning on farm involves more than just the HHP itself and while it provides a useful opportunity to enable initial discussions to take place, health planning is a dynamic and constantly evolving process.



Figure 3. The SMART approach to objectives and targets.

As discussed by Sibley (2006), reviewing and taking action are key components of an effective plan and any objectives and targets should follow the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based) approach (**Figure 3**).

Once a plan is in place and the farmer is at the implementing or sustaining stage of the cycle, it is here where cost-benefit calculations can help not only in decision making, but also as motivators to continue further change.

Conclusion

Two key components affect herd health planning: the quality of the advice provided and the way it is presented. While huge advances have taken place in our understanding of the most effective ways of tackling health problems on farm, this is not reflected in the levels of disease in the national herd.

A greater understanding of the motivators behind farmers implementing change is key to future success. It is accepted every farm is different and requires a different HHP. However, it must also be accepted every farmer is different and, as vets, we need to adapt our role to both the farm and farmer.

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