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## **Delivery of Dairy Veterinary Services, Perspective from an Australian Dairy Veterinary Business**

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In the last 100 years the role of veterinarians on dairy farms has developed significantly. The eradication programs for pleuropneumonia, brucellosis and tuberculosis established veterinary services in rural Australia. With the increased availability of veterinarians, and the increasing presence of veterinary pharmaceuticals, successful ambulatory veterinary services focused on the individual animal were delivered. From the 1960s the focus for veterinary intervention began to move towards the delivery of herd health services, concentrating on reproductive monitoring by manual palpation for pregnancy diagnosis, and mastitis control. During the 1980s, attention to nutritional management of the dairy herd increased, greater emphasis was placed on the importance of replacement heifer growth, and milk quality management. In the late 1980s and 1990s, changes in herd feeding practices increased the rate of abomasal surgeries performed, and hormonal manipulation of the anoestrus cow became commonplace. Changes in herd feeding practices were effective in reducing the impact of hypomagnesaemia and hypocalcaemia. Throughout these changes and up to the 1990s the majority of veterinary interventions were delivered either for individual animals or small groups of animals in response to specific identifiable problems, or as part of a herd reproductive monitoring program.

Changes in the dairy industry, including the deregulation of the Australian dairy market, have accelerated change in the delivery of animal health services. The terms of trade on farms have deteriorated considerably in the last 30 years. In this period, the price of a milking cow has not changed, the value of milk has declined yet the price of veterinary services and therapeutics has more than doubled. The farmer response to the progressive deterioration in the terms of trade has been to rationalise the services used and where possible have these tasks performed by farm employees. Farmers are now more demanding and more discerning of the services they will employ. They will readily adopt services that give good returns on their investment, or that mitigate risk for their farming operation. Farmers still employ the traditional veterinary services where they fit into their business needs. For veterinarians, the challenge is to deliver a range services that the farming clientele need and are willing to pay for. An additional challenge is for veterinarians to promote themselves as being able to positively effect the farms' function and profit rather than be someone who just fixes sick animals, manually palpates pregnancies or sells therapeutic products.

## Discussion

The delivery of our animal health service can be defined into three categories. We have determined these categories by the nature of the delivery, rather than the technology utilised, or the desire of the service by the client. We can roughly describe the categories as fixing problems (Reactive), managing situations and preventing problems (Coordinated) and designing and running a better operation (Strategic).

1. **Reactive:** Services are delivered in response to an identified need. Includes the traditional ambulatory veterinary services, but also includes response to exotic and emergency disease incursions. Historically, this form of service has been well delivered by private veterinarians and government agencies. This continues to be the case. To be successful there must be sufficient veterinarians to attend to the demand at the appropriate time. By nature, this demand is variable in its type, frequency of events and the time of need. The veterinarians need to be well trained and resourced. In many circumstance the delivery of reactive services is physically demanding. Veterinarians performing this role require the support of high quality diagnostic service. In the circumstances where disease incursions occur, well established communication pathways and organisational structures are critical. While it is essential to be able to deliver reactive veterinary services on demand, the cost of doing so is high for the deliverer and user of the service.
2. **Coordinated:** The development of the herd health systems demonstrated that many animals health services can be scheduled, eg treatment of anoestrus cows, pregnancy diagnosis, endemic disease monitoring, replacement heifer management etc. A wide range of services can be offered with in this model such as nutritional and agronomic advice, milk harvesting and milk quality management with the delivery being matched to the requirements of the enterprise, and the production cycle. This form of service delivery has advantages to the user and the deliverer. For the service deliverer, it is easier to manage the work load, and a greater volume of contact time can be managed for a given period. The consequence is that cost of delivering the service is reduced compared to the reactive model. The personnel and business delivering this model need to have a wide skill base and understand the integrated systems of the farming operation. This increases the training requirements of the veterinarians, potentially increases the value of the service delivered to farming enterprise. Within the scope of delivery, the services vary in their physical demands on veterinarian and the resources required.
3. **Strategic:** Involvement of a veterinary advisor in improving the strategic management of the farming enterprise. Activities with in this service include assisting the farming enterprise to identify the strengths and limitations of the business, working with the enterprise in establishing the best direction for that enterprise to follow to take advantage of their resources and limit the impact of their weaknesses, advising on the required changes to the enterprise to fulfill the strategic goals. Paramount to the success of the farming enterprise is its' ability to identify and develop the skills and aptitudes of the people working at all levels within the system. The advisor facilitates this process.

The role being assumed by the veterinary advisor is akin to an independent non-executive company director. In order to deliver this style of service the veterinarian needs to acquire a selection of additional skills, including an excellent understanding of the operational requirements of the farm, the animal industry they are working in and advanced business management skills. Veterinarians who will succeed in this role will have well developed networks with other service providers, including financial institutions. Relatively few veterinarians will develop the skills required to deliver strategic services and fewer will feel comfortable delivering strategic business services to their clients.

We believe that it is in the interests of farming enterprises we work with and veterinary service providers, that a mix of the three categories be offered. It is “horses for courses”, and not all services are needed, desired or can be utilised by all clients. The mix of services utilised by a specific client, is unique to that client.

For a veterinary business, being able to offer a portfolio of services has significant operational benefits. The range of services permits the development of specific skills by individual staff, enhancing quality and range of services offered. Additionally, the career development and staff satisfaction is enhanced. Having a team of staff, with a broad range of skills and abilities further increases the range of services that can be offered to clients, as well as widening the range of clients who will engage the business. In addition, it enables the veterinary business to offer the services of multidisciplinary teams to provide comprehensive integrated services to our clients.

### **Abstract**

Les services vétérinaires ont évolué sensiblement durant les 100 dernières années. La nature de l'industrie du bétail s'assurera que les services continuent à évoluer. Pour que les fournisseurs de services vétérinaires restent liés aux clients il ne faut pas compter uniquement sur l'expertise technique. Les services offerts doivent satisfaire les besoins des producteurs pour faire en sorte qu'ils aient un bon retour sur leur investissement ou pour atténuer les risques sur leur opération. Les vétérinaires doivent se promouvoir comme étant en mesure d'améliorer les opérations et les profits des fermes.

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