

VANISHING VETS

Like many rural services, farm vets are struggling to maintain viable businesses. *Farmers Weekly* set out to establish how many would survive the next 10 years



Jonathan Long
Livestock editor

Farm vets are staring into the abyss, with nearly one fifth of practices set to quit the sector in the next 10 years, according to a survey conducted by *Farmers Weekly*.

The survey of large animal vet practices in the UK has revealed an exodus of worrying levels, with 18% of farm animal vet practices planning to cease practice in the next 10 years.

British Vet Association vice president David Catlow said the prospect of losing nearly a fifth of all farm vet practices in the next 10 years could present huge problems for farm animal health and welfare and, more importantly, for public health.

"One of the key roles farm vets play is in disease surveillance, both in spotting exotic disease outbreaks, such as foot-and-mouth, and in recognising the early signs of new and emerging diseases.

"Examples of this include BSE and digital dermatitis, both of which were recognised on-farm in their early stages by farm vets. Without vets visiting farms, the risk is that incidences of existing diseases and emerging threats will be left unseen, presenting increasing animal health and welfare threats and, in some cases, threats to human health," he explained. It is this lack of surveillance and the potential threat to human health that are the biggest implications of a fall in farm vet numbers, believes Royal College of Vet Surgeons president Lynne Hill.

"We must look to find a way in which some support can be given to the farming or vet sectors to ensure vets are on-farm regularly enough to notice disease trends or threats.

"The government appears to have forgotten the role farm vets play in public health. There are animal disease issues that can impact on human health, in particular the zoonotic conditions, such as salmonella and E. Coli 0157.



* The government appears to have forgotten the role farm vets play in public health

"An animal health issue can quickly become a public health issue. Unless these conditions are picked up through regular vet visits problems will escalate quickly," she added.

Vet Dick Sibley, based in Tiverton, Devon, said this active surveillance by vets cannot be replicated by any other means. "No matter how much we train farmers they are often too close to notice any difference in their animals. Sometimes they lose an animal without knowing why, but fail to investigate further."

However, when *Farmers Weekly* contacted DEFRA, it seemed unconcerned with the situation, suggesting that disease surveillance will be unaffected by the dramatic reduction in farm vet practices.

"The survey findings do not mean our capacity to conduct effective surveillance will inevitably be compromised," a spokesman said.

Furthermore, DEFRA believes animal welfare is unlikely to be affected, a view contested by many in the vet profession. But Quentin McKellar, principal of the Royal Vet College, London, said there needs to be pragmatic decisions taken by farmers about the economics of treating animals and where it is uneconomic to involve a vet, an animal may have to culled rather than treated.

"We have to look at the economics of livestock farming in global terms and tailor our service to those clients who can afford it. The vet profession, like the farming industry, has to be efficient

and economically viable."

Mr Sibley believes this will be more important in some sectors than others. "There is, and always will be, a considerable demand to provide first-aid to high-value animals, such as dairy cows. However, in sectors where animals are worth less, there is reduced demand for emergency cover."

For many in the industry, including Professor McKellar, this reduction is a reflection in the falling number of farms, and hence a decline in demand. It is, they say, the supply-and-demand economy bearing its teeth in the vet sector.

He believes having a more efficient and streamlined vet sector could benefit livestock farmers. "If those left in the industry are the ones offering the level of service that farmers want and need, then they will be much better able to serve the dynamic livestock farming sector that will exist in future."

COOPERATION

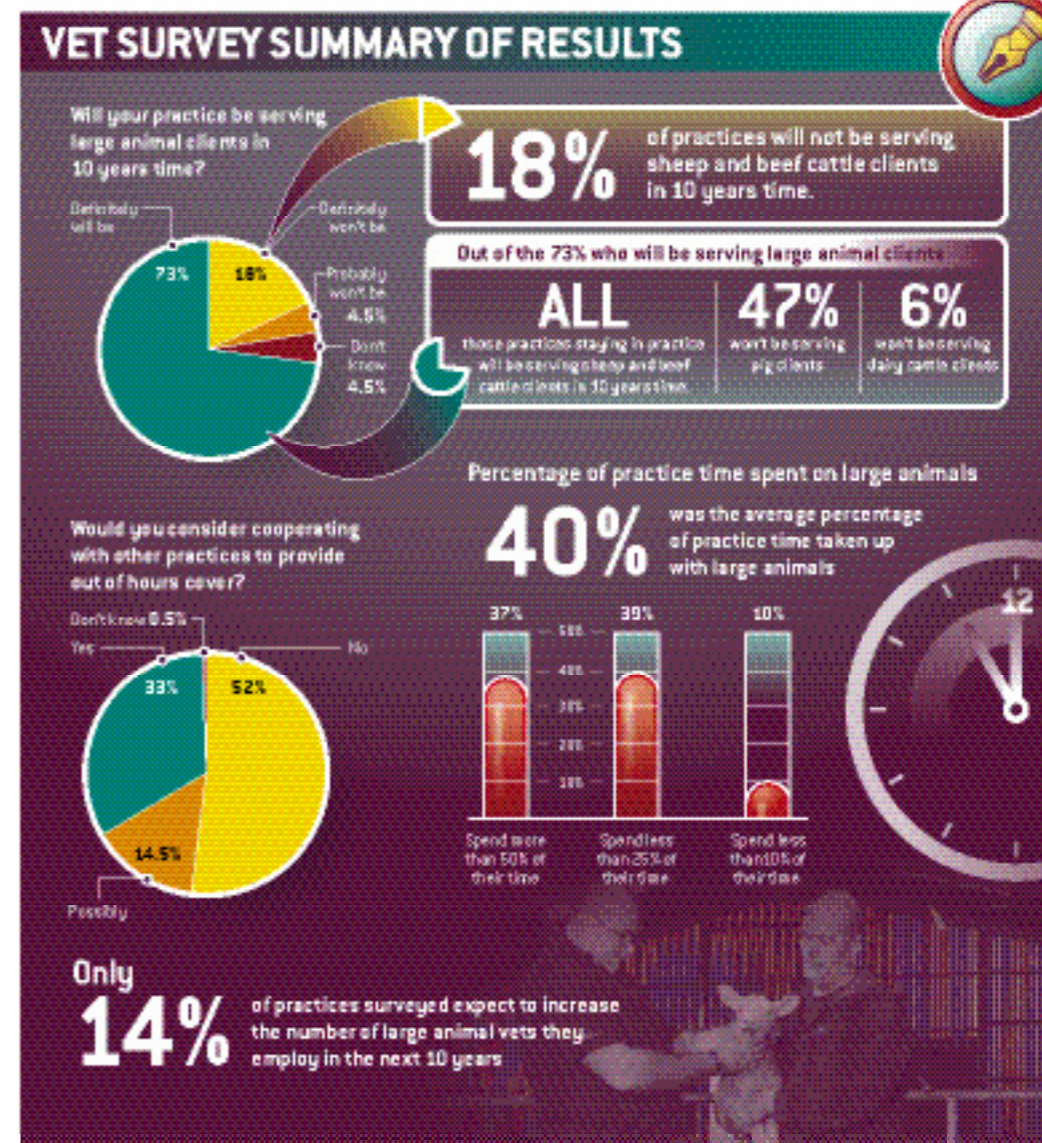
Despite the predicted fall in the number of vet practices, most practices surveyed said they would not consider cooperating to provide out-of-hours cover.

Just 33% of those surveyed said they would be cooperating with other practices to ensure provision of out-of-hours cover, both at night and at weekends.

However, with fewer young vets willing to undertake out-of-hours cover while their small animal counterparts contract out such work, many more practices could be forced to cooperate.

Prof McKellar believes there will be increasing pressure to cooperate as practices leave the sector. "Collaborative ventures of all types will become increasingly important as practices could soon lack the critical mass needed to justify paying staff to undertake out-of-hours cover."

And while many practices may fear cooperation could see their clients being poached by a partner practice, he suggests this will be unlikely in most cases. "As long as the level of service provided by the practice is sufficient it is unlikely farmers will swap vets on



Reasons for quitting

Practices listed many reasons for ceasing farm animal practice, but one recurring theme was the inability to recruit and retain young vets with a desire to work in farm animal practice.

One practice echoing the thoughts of many was the Aberdeenshire-based Town and Country Vet Group, which is quitting farm animal work this year. Citing the lack of young vets as a key reason for its decision, the practice said it could not provide a 24 hour service, as it was unable to recruit vets willing to provide large animal cover.

This concern over working hours was raised by several practices, but is something Quentin McKellar of the Royal Vet College, London, believes will have to change in years to come.

"Vets, like other professionals, want more of a work:life balance nowadays and this, coupled with the EU working time directive, means it is becoming increasingly difficult to offer out-of-hours cover."

One practice also raised the issue of diminishing margins on vet medicine sales as an issue in their decision to give up, suggesting that increased competition in the medicine market and farmers unwilling to pay more for vet services meant farm practice was difficult to justify financially.

Other reasons listed by practices for ceasing farm animal work included the lack of financial return offered by farm practice, over-regulation of both vets and farmers and a diminishing client base.

work in 10 years' time, while in the East Midlands, only two thirds will still be in practice in 10 years.

Just 72% of practices in the south-east and south-west will remain in practice and only 60% of those in Wales will still be around in 10 years.

However, there is better news for producers in the north-west, north-east, Scotland, Northern Ireland and central, southern counties, where between 75% and 100% of the practices surveyed will still be serving farm clients in 2016.

the strength of a night visit."

For some, the declining number of vets willing to undertake out-of-hours work could present a unique business opportunity, says independent vet consultant Tony Andrews. "It may be that specialist out-of-hours services will spring up, with a group of farms being served by the same out-of-hours enterprise. This has worked successfully in the small animal sector and could work for farm practice too, provided it is managed properly."

But for many of the 52% of practices not cooperating on out-of-hours cover, it is a lack of suitable partners that makes such a venture difficult.

Many practices said such cooperation would be difficult to undertake because of the absence of other practices in their area.

EXPANSION

While the fall in the number of farm animal practices could be seen as a prompt for others to expand their services, just 14%

of practices remaining in 10 years time intend to increase the number of farm vets they employ.

One particular area of concern for many practices is the possibility of practices losing significant proportions of their income that is derived from the provision of Local Vet Inspection (LVI) services, such as TB testing.

Mr Sibley estimates that about 10% of his practice's income comes from LVI work. "If lay people are employed to undertake TB testing, as DEFRA proposes, then

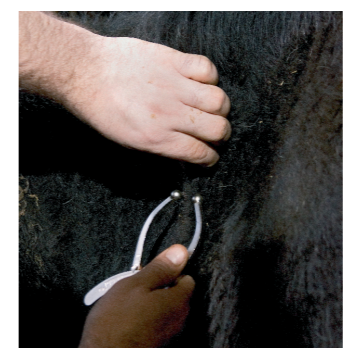
many practices could be forced to cut vet numbers accordingly."

For Nick Roper of Barnstaple-based Charter Vet Group, TB testing represents enough work to permanently employ 1.5 vets, meaning any loss of LVI work could impact on income. The same factor was also cited by the North Tawton, Devon-based North Park Vet Group as a limiting factor in its future plans. Responding to the survey, the practice said it would probably be employing one less vet in 10 years time, although that figure would depend on the future of TB testing.

REGIONAL OUTLOOK

There were significant regional differences in the intentions of vets towards farm animal practice, with some regions likely to lose more practices than others.

Hardest hit will be the Midlands counties, with both the West and East Midlands likely to suffer huge practice losses. In the West Midlands only half the practices surveyed intend to remain in farm



Losing TB testing could cut incomes.



CASE STUDY
Rob Drysdale

WESTPOINT VET SERVICES,
HORSHAM, WEST SUSSEX

In 15 years time there will be just 40 dedicated farm animal practices left in the UK, according to Sussex-based vet Rob Drysdale. But for cattle vet Mr Drysdale, being based in an area of lower-than-average livestock density doesn't mean he won't be one of those 40.

"Having worked in this area for about a year in another practice before setting up independently I saw what happened to farms in the region and realised there was a gap in the market."

Livestock farms in the south-east tend to be larger than those further north and west, with the industry having already gone through much of the restructuring under way in the rest of the country, he says.

"Average dairy herd size in our practice is running at more than 250 cows, with the largest nearly touching 1000 cows. These herds require specialist, highly skilled vet



Vets must be used more for preventative treatments to maximise the benefits.

input towards herd management. Many mixed practices are unable to offer the level of support these farms need and deserve."

Key to working with these larger units, particularly in the dairy sector, is to ensure as much work as possible is planned, rather than relying on ambulatory-type work, says Mr Drysdale. "Across all our visits last month just 80 out of 400 were for non-planned work. So just 20% of our work is the truly emergency, first-aid type, which

has historically been the mainstay of many practices."

On the back of these planned visits, the practice also aims to ensure that as many farms as possible make use of the vets' knowledge of disease prevention and health planning. "We have set up contracts with some farms to provide specific services, such as foot trimming for severe cases of lameness and lab facilities for mastitis diagnosis."

However, this does not mean

the practice is not facing challenges in the next few years and Mr Drysdale is working hard to ensure all his vets are kept busy. "We have diversified into providing advice to many large-scale shoots in the area. With 5% of practice turnover coming from this source it almost beats sheep as an income stream."

And there will be more challenges in future as the group expands into new territories to serve farmers whose vets cease farm animal work.

CASE STUDY
John Hunter

BOWBRIDGE VETS, STROUD, GLOS

An increasing specialisation of farm animal practice and a lack of young vets willing and able to undertake farm work have been the death knell of farm work for John Hunter.

Having joined his practice in 1973 when farm work accounted for about half of all work undertaken, he now finds himself in a

situation where less than 10% of the practice's work is large animal related.

"The mainstay of our remaining farm work is TB testing, with relatively little fire brigade-type work now undertaken and all our out-of-hours farm work moved to another practice."

One of the key contributory factors has been the increasing specialisation of farm work, particularly in the dairy sector, and the related growth in the number of dedicated farm animal practices locally.

"We have lost a reasonable number of clients to these practices as they have developed and as clients have drifted away we have recognised the economic realities of the situation. We haven't been able to afford to invest in farm animal practice and earn a return on the investment."

Additionally, farmers are also more educated in animal health and better able to treat a large number of cases themselves, reducing the requirement for vets. "And the loss of clients is a self-perpetuating problem, as without

a critical mass of clients we are unable to carry the range of drugs required, further limiting our ability to serve our remaining clients."

On top of that, with a reasonably affluent population on its doorstep, the practice has recognised the earning potential from its small animal work and has capitalised on it. "We now have seven vets dedicated to small animal work, which is a far more economic proposition than having the same number serving farm clients," he adds.

CASE STUDY
Rebecca Cavill

THE STUDENT VET'S VIEW, ROYAL VET COLLEGE, LONDON

As a student vet I am often asked whether I want to work with large or small animals. I usually answer that I would like to work in mixed practice, which usually begs the question, why?

There are several reasons. First, this is the type of practice in which I did most of my work experience.

There may be as few as one large animal practice per country in future, says Rebecca Cavill.

My friendly Irish mentor was extremely fond of the large animal side of practice, so I was fortunate to see nearly 50:50 large and small animal work.

Second, coming from a farming background, I would find it strange not to work with large animals. And third, not only is there a greater variety of work, but it also offers an escape from the office.

While I not surprised by the results of *Farmers Weekly's* survey, I am disappointed that the picture painted is so bleak. However, unlike many, I believe public health is unlikely to be compromised by the reduction in farm vets, as it is largely at the top of DEFRA's agenda and the department is unlikely to allow public health to suffer, regardless of what happens in the vet profession.

By far the greater issue will be animal welfare and this could be compromised by a lack of farm vets, although animal health

should be unaffected as most farms are making greater use of preventative treatments, rather than relying on the traditional ambulatory approach.

However, there are understandable reasons for young vets seeking work in sectors other than farm animal practice. The length of the course is a key issue – after five years even the youngest vet graduate will be 23 years old. Therefore, it is in graduates' best interests to take a job that can assuage student debt as soon as possible. As such, pet owners are more likely to spend large sums on their animals than farmers who have to justify each call-out, drug and operation.

By the time I qualify I think there will be mostly small animal practices with fewer mixed practices and few large practices – maybe as little as one per county – as it becomes more difficult to make a living from farming.

However, I believe there will still be a call for large animal vets, but they will mostly be used in advisory roles, rather than being actively involved in visiting farms.