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Dilemmas experienced by government veterinarians when responding professionally to farm animal welfare incidents in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This paper identifies the dilemmas experienced by government veterinarians during their investigations of farm animal welfare incidents that involve herd owner social, health, and/or psychological difficulties. The paper builds on exploratory qualitative research into the impact of these difficulties on farm animal welfare.

Design: The study used a qualitative research approach. Focus groups were conducted.

Setting: In Ireland, an Early Warning System (EWS), which brings together relevant agencies, is in place to identify and prevent farm animal welfare problems before they become critical. This study is concerned with the experiences of government veterinarians who respond to farm animal welfare incidents. Specific focus is on incidents that involve herd owner social/psychological/health-related difficulties.

Participants: In total, n=18 government veterinarians (representing 15 per cent of the population sample), all with a keen interest in farm animal welfare, participated. These were selected on the basis of their interest, experience, and involvement in farm animal welfare. One government veterinarian declined to participate. Four focus groups were conducted with government veterinarians. These took place in the south (S), south-west (SW), midlands (M), and north-west region of Ireland (NW). All 16 District Veterinary Offices (DVOs) were represented in the focus groups.

Results: The results reveal three professional dilemmas that exist for government veterinarians: (1) defining professional parameters; (2) determining the appropriate response; (3) involvement versus detachment. Participants reported not wanting any additional training. Instead, it was agreed that a formal bridge to social service providers who have the professional capability to respond appropriately and with confidence, was required.

Conclusions: Clearly defined guidelines are required for government veterinarians in their encounters with farm animal welfare incidents where there is a complex human component. A coordinated multiagency approach that is flexible enough to meet the needs of individual farm animal welfare cases is required.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, an Early Warning System (EWS) was established under recommendations by the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council. This System comprises a joint approach between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), the Irish Farmers Association (IFA), and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA), towards identifying and preventing farm animal welfare problems before they become critical. Despite its establishment, on-farm animal welfare problems continue to occur (Kelly and others 2011,2013). In 2012, the authors of this present paper conducted an exploratory study to identify the human factors that contribute to farm animal welfare incidents. Results revealed the impact of social and health-related factors associated with age-related difficulties; a lack of available farm help; perceptions of acceptable standards of animal welfare; mental health problems; and prevalent level of stress (C. Devitt and others, unpublished 2012). Government and private veterinarians identified physical and social isolation among herd owners, addiction and mental health problems, including depression, on farms where a farm animal welfare incident(s) had taken place. Professional responses to farm animal welfare incidents may require a sensitive approach, involving the veterinarian, and also social and medical care perspectives (Devitt and others 2013).

Professional dilemmas for the veterinary profession

In numerous literature about the veterinary profession, veterinary members are described as community caregivers, contributing to public and mental health (Arkow 1994,1998, Rollin 2006, Lowe 2009, British Veterinary Association 2010), spanning a number of parties including patients, clients, employers,

colleagues and the general public (Bayles 1989, Morgan 2009, Bellemain 2012, Éloit 2012). However, ethical dilemmas arise when veterinarians must determine whether responsibility is to animal care, or the human client (Arkow 1998, Rutgers and Heeger 2005, Yeates 2009). Rollin (1999) describes the tensions veterinarians feel in serving patient and client as the fundamental question in veterinary medical ethics. The promotion of animal welfare can create competing interests and moral concerns for the professionals involved, and for those members of the general public concerned about animal welfare. Ethical dilemmas often contribute to job-related stress among veterinarians (Batchelor and Mckeegan 2012). Pilgram (2001) identified three dialectical professional tensions in offering social support at a time of animal crisis: (1) identifying who the client is; (2) professional role confusion and (3) dealing with emotional struggles. Anneberg and others (2013) identified a theme of disagreement among farm animal welfare inspectors regarding their role in encouraging compliance and dealing with non-compliance among herd owners. Individual interpretation of animal welfare cases is also a central theme, and with this, a general agreement that the inspection process could not be standardised (Anneberg and others 2013). In making professional decisions, the veterinarian is guided by their conscience, an adherence to ethical behaviour, professional guidelines, cultural norms and legal framework; this is especially so in the absence of professional ethical guidelines (Arkow 1998). Consequently, moral problems are approached differently, creating different interpretations of professional challenges and often creating different responses (Morgan 2009).

Regarding animal welfare, some responses may have serious consequences. In cases of animal hoarding, Tolin and others (2008) reported the prevalence of chronic and serious medical conditions, including mental health problems among animal hoarders. In such cases, forcibly removing animals can cause animal owners to relapse (Arluke and others 2002, Berry and others 2005). Animal hoarding can be a symptom of a larger complex human situation that cannot be solely addressed by veterinarians and animal welfare groups (Patronek and others 2006, Chapin and others 2007, Nathanson 2009). Devitt and others (2013) reported that among Irish government veterinarians, concerns were raised pertaining to the level of responsibility they have in responding to the often complex human problems of farm animal welfare cases, and how far this should extend. In the absence of appropriate guidelines, veterinary professionals are faced with the uncertainty of not knowing the most appropriate response (McGuinness and others 2005, Devitt and others 2013). Adopting a family-centred approach to veterinary medicine can provide a means of reaching an animal welfare solution; the veterinarian works in partnership with the animal owner, while adopting an educator and consultant role to inform the animal owner on proper welfare standards (Tannenbaum 1995, Rollin 2006, Farm Animal Welfare Council 2007, Williams and Jewell 2012). Elsewhere, recommendations are for the veterinarians to adopt the necessary social skills, 'as a service which includes fulfilling human needs with regard to animal welfare', while maintaining a duty of care to the animals (Odendaal 1998).

The Irish legislative context

In Ireland, the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 states that an animal health and welfare notice may be served on the animal owner/keeper where an authorised officer is of the opinion animal welfare standards have been compromised. It outlines that an individual can be deemed incapable of taking care of animals, and in such situations, the animals can be sold or disposed of, the population reduced, and the person be prevented from further purchasing animals or having animals in their possession or control.

The role of government veterinarians in Ireland

Government veterinarians contribute to ensuring compliance with food safety, animal health and animal welfare regulations in food animal production. In relation to farm animal welfare, they are empowered by legislation to issue 'welfare notices' to herd owners, when the management of animal welfare standards is in non-compliance with the regulations. A predetermined series of random welfare visits are conducted every year across Ireland though not every farm is visited as part of this process. Additionally, inspections take place in response to reported concerns or complaints received by the District Veterinary Office (DVO). The herd owners referred to in this study were visited in response to an incident being reported to the DVO. The incident may have been reported from a private veterinary practitioner, a family member, neighbour, or member of the public, or a government veterinarian who was on the farm for a different reason and noticed a farm animal welfare problem. Farm animal welfare issues range from animal lameness, malnutrition, downer animals, parasitic animals, and animal death. Welfare issues can also include lack of animal shelter, lack of or poor quality food, or no access to water, for example. Visits responding to such reports are generally unannounced, but if the government veterinarian knows the herd owner and has a previous relationship with him/her they may telephone first to inform of the planned visit. In the first instance, if the welfare issue is not critical to the welfare of the animals, the government veterinarian will attempt to reach compliance with the required welfare standards by explaining the requirements and talking to the herd owner.

If the herd owner does not comply, a written welfare notice is issued. Welfare notices inform herd owners of what is required by them in order to resolve animal welfare problems on-farm. It is preferable that the herd owner is present when notices are issued. Notices are

more rapidly issued where there is animal suffering or acute risk of animal suffering. The written notice is left with the herd owner and a copy of the notice is filed within the DVO. The government veterinarian will explain to the herd owner what the notice entails, what the herd owner is required to do and the possible consequences if he/she doesn't comply. Some government veterinarians, but not all, and not routinely, will give the herd owner their mobile number.

An 'exit strategy' is devised by the government veterinarian for all welfare cases. This requires that government veterinarians must deal with the immediate problem in an effective manner, and avoid, if possible, long-term involvement. An exit strategy is devised on the premise that the welfare of the animals and compliance with legislation are the primary concerns. The role of the government veterinarian, thereafter, is one of monitoring the situation. These herds may be visited on several occasions until the problem is resolved, and depending on the severity of the incident they may be visited on an on-going basis over a number of years following on from the incident (i.e., until the government veterinarian is satisfied that there is no longer a problem in the herd, and that the herd owner is managing). An 'at risk' herd approach is operated by DAFM – where herds with previous 'history' of farm animal welfare incidents are included in a list of herds that are at least visited twice, by way of 'passing visits' in subsequent years – to check on issues such as availability of fodder, that all tagging and registration have taken place. This allows for early intervention with these herds if problems are anticipated. This is carried out by government veterinarians and/or other DAFM authorised officers under the direction of the government veterinarians.

European Union Single Farm payments are made dependant on adherence with various requirements – including farm animal welfare. Support payments are paid to herd owners; however, the payments are dependent on herd owners complying with various animal health, animal welfare, food safety, environmental requirements. It is a requirement that any inspection that identifies non-compliance with these standards is captured by the regulatory authorities and 'cross reported' to the payment authorities.

Objectives of the study

The objective of this study was to identify the professional experiences and responses of Irish government veterinarians in responding to farm animal welfare incidents that involve herd owners with social, health and psychological-related difficulties.

METHODS

Study design

Research ethical approval was granted by the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee. Qualitative focus groups were used (Bryman 2008). The use of focus groups was instrumental in bringing government veterinarians together to share their experiences, revealing similarities and differences in individual approaches to farm animal welfare investigations. The 32-item COREQ criteria were followed when conducting the focus groups (Tong and others 2007).

Participant recruitment and response

Superintending Veterinary Inspectors in the 16 DVOs located throughout Ireland were invited to nominate government veterinarians who had experience in farm animal welfare. At the time of the study, the overall population of government veterinarians was n=118. In total, n=19 government veterinarians were purposely invited to participate; n=18 government veterinarians (representing 15 per cent of the overall target population), expressed their willingness to participate. (One government veterinarian declined to participate due to personal reasons). Focus groups were conducted by the first author (who had no prior knowledge of the participants), in the south (*S*, n=5 participants), south-west (*SW*, n=5 participants), midlands (*M*, n=4 participants), and north-west regions of Ireland (*NW*, n=4 participants), with all 16 DVOs represented in the focus groups. Focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. The number of participants in each focus group was dictated by the number of government veterinarians available to participate in each region.

Focus group topics

Focus group questions centred on participants perceptions of the government veterinarian role in relation to farm animal welfare. Participants were specifically encouraged to reflect on farm animal welfare incidents that involved negative life experiences among the herd owners, and to recall their experiences of such cases. Questions also centred on the professional challenges experienced by government veterinarians in relation to farm animal welfare. No information is available on the demographic profile of the participant group or on the wider government veterinarian population; therefore, it is difficult to make any comparisons between participants and the overall government veterinarian population in Ireland.

Data analysis

Focus groups were recorded (with participant consent), and transcribed, to supplement notes collected during the focus groups. Participants were not given the opportunity to review the transcripts. Identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. NVivo (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) was used to assist the data analysis process, and data was analysed using thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001). This involved a multistage process of developing themes. Firstly transcripts were coded (i.e., basic labels were ascribed to describe the discussion topic). Codes were grouped together to form more abstract *organising themes*. Finally, these *organising*

themes were grouped together to form *global themes* – these overarching themes allowed the data to be presented in a systematic manner (Attride-Stirling 2001). The results section presents the global themes derived from the data. Inter-reliability of the themes was reached through agreement between the first author (who also conducted the focus groups) and a second researcher who was independent of the study. Both researchers are social scientists without any connections to focus group participants, or direct involvement in animal welfare in Ireland.

RESULTS

Results overview

The results reveal three areas of professional dilemmas for government veterinarians: 'Defining professional parameters', 'Determining the appropriate response' and 'Involvement versus detachment'. Government veterinarians' perception of their training needs is also presented.

Defining professional parameters

Defining professional parameters refers to veterinarians attempts to define the role parameters of their involvement in farm animal welfare incidents that comprise a human element. All focus groups participants agreed that, in responding to animal welfare incidents, including those that involve herd owner difficulties, their primary focus is directed towards the welfare of the animals. Yet, when asked on their role responsibility, two groups emerge from data analysis. The first group of government veterinarian opinion (n=15) acknowledged that the social/health/psychological difficulties of herd owners cannot be ignored. However, these participants were unclear on the extent to which government veterinarians should respond:

> As [government veterinarians], we're meant to focus entirely on the welfare of the animals… but you have to have subjective empathy with the person you're dealing with. I usually find that that often comes first, even if you go out and see animals in terrible shape—when you meet the human and get to know the story, it takes precedence and we have to respond to that. (NW)

> If a farmer picks up the phone or texts you, the communication is with you…it's probably out of office hours—at that point, you become not a vet inspector, but a member of the human race. (M)

The second group of explicit opinion (n=3) emphasised the responsibility to the boundaries established by the legislative framework of the government veterinary role. For this group, there are clear boundaries between the role remit and responsibilities of the veterinarian, and contribution to human care:

> You have to stand back…you have to say who pays you—that's the [DAFM] and you have a duty to your employer. If you've been given an animal welfare brief, then you have a duty to the animals. (S)

> We are authorised officers of the [DAFM] in legislation, and our job is to act in loco minister, in this legislation. The legislation sets out the parameters within which we work, and it sets out the welfare standards that we're to try and ensure are implemented. My view on it is this: the animals, we look at the animals and their environment and management. (M)

> I go back to legislation, as much as possible… it says that animals must be looked after by a person who is competent to do so. Now, if I decide as a vet that the person who is facing me, who I think is incompetent, I can do a number of things. No.1 I'll issue a notice that you have to sell all your stock. Or two, you appoint someone to be the keeper of the animals on your farm. (NW)

Determining the appropriate response

Determining the appropriate response is an extension of 'Defining professional parameters', and refers to government veterinarian attempts to work out the most appropriate response to farm animal welfare incidents that involve human difficulties. Key aspects that influence this process include interpretation-based and related empathy-based decision making.

Interpretation-based response

In all focus groups, it was agreed by the majority of participants that when responding to a farm animal welfare incident involving a problematic human element, an interpretation-based approach is taken for each individual case. This approach is apparent in the following participant quotes:

> … you meet an individual, you make a judgment in some way, and you say, how will this person respond? You look on it in that broad way and deal with it on that basis. (SW)

> I use the same instrument [i.e. legislative framework], but I'll handle it totally differently depending on the complexities of the case. (M)

> I try to test [carry out a TB test on the herd owner's farm] every couple years. I dose her cattle. I can't get her to take the dog out of the small dark kennel. Now if I was doing my job as the [DAFM] vet, I would have seized all her animals, and brought the [health service provider] in and let them deal with the problem. But I feel I can't do that, because it would just make things worse for her. (S)

Two government veterinarians described this process as finding the 'comfort zone' of the herd owner:

> … [to] do your job to make the animals' condition better… you make some kind of a subjective judgment of where they [herd owner] are at, and try to keep them within that zone, and work there too. (M)

> The [herd owners] cattle is their gold, their surroundings. If you take away some of their surroundings, they're at a great loss… you don't touch their comfort zone. (NW)

Government veterinarians make various decisions depending on their interpretation of the case:

> [Herd owner] was prosecuted [for a farm animal welfare incident] ten years ago, but we're not going to bother now—he's [greater than 80 years] so I won't bother. But I've reduced him from [more than 100] cattle to [less than 100], by degrees, taking six months. (S)

> [In] the vast majority of cases, there is a social or psychological problem with it. There has only been one welfare case in my twelve years where I wanted to prosecute someone. And because I felt he didn't have a psychological problem. (SW)

Those who emphasised the guiding principles of the legislative framework (n=3), again reiterated the need to comply with the legislative guidelines, yet through further discussion during focus groups, it was acknowledged that individual interpretation occurs even in implementing the legislative framework.

Empathy-based approach

An empathy-based approach arises from individual interpretations of how best to proceed with the farm situation. Apparent in all focus group discussions, the impact of empathy on the decision on how to respond to farm animal welfare cases is evident from the following quotes:

> Everybody has a soul and we do our best, and we try to mind them [herd owners]. And it's somewhere in between, we have to find ourselves… it's a balancing act. (SW)

> I knew that [herd owner] had a family situation—he was looking after his mother and father, I never saw them, but I could see from the state of the place that he was in a severe situation inside in the house, never mind outside the house. You try to relate. I remember looking after my dad, and you do get into situations where you just don't want to be bothered. You just do what you have to. (M)

> Empathy really does play a big role, and while in some ways it can be a good thing to help you understand the farmer, it also means that you can get quite close and blinded by the situation on the farm. (S)

> And that's the suffering you see, in another human individual—there's a natural empathy toward that. And trying to deal with both [human suffering and animal suffering] can be quite difficult. (NW)

Individual interpretation and allowing a degree of empathy with the herd owner situation are described in all focus groups as often facilitating herd owner compliance.

> Our trouble is this question… what is our role, as an empathetic human being, I think that is very important. All you can do is try and deal with the current situation, try and deal with their current mental state and coax them along and ask them to cooperate with you, that you're not going to march them into court. (SW)

> Each case is individual. And you have to really empathize with each individual case if you want to be of help, otherwise you can't deal with them at all. (NW)

> It may not be our responsibility as VIs, but to a certain extent it's your responsibility as a human being to link in with these situations. You do need to go beyond your remit. You can go in and just be ruthless, but that certainly achieves very little in improvement in the human situation you're dealing with, which many times is equally as serious as the animal situation. (S)

Professional uncertainty

Referred to in all four focus groups, the dilemma of *determining the appropriate response* is added to by a professional uncertainty arising from a lack of clearly defined guidelines and mechanisms. Additionally, 10 participants explicitly recall feelings of uncertainty because of not being suitably qualified to provide the necessary human support. Two example quotes are provided:

> You're in there [involved with the farm animal welfare case] and you can say this farmer has serious problems and I'm not able to deal with it. I have contact numbers of people to ring, and I recognise the problem, but I'd be fearful I could do damage. You're not trained for it, but yet you're faced with it, you can't ignore it. (S)

> You're left with very serious issues, and totally unqualified—as much as you'd like to deal with it yourself… but at the end of the day, you're still not qualified to deal with that.(M)

Despite the reported problem of an absence of guidelines and support mechanisms, the general consensus is that given the individual complexities of herd owner situations, it is very difficult to standardise practice:

> Whatever you do there's a degree of subjective judgment in it and you cannot legislate for that. It's not possible. No matter how much legislation you bring in there's always going to be a degree of subjective human judgment. (SW)

> How can you have a standardised approach – we encounter different problems, addiction, depression, financial problems, stress, all very complex, and each one needs to be dealt with differently. I can't imagine how a one system fits all could cover all those problems. (NW)

The need for a formal protocol providing some guidance on how to address the human aspect behind farm animal welfare cases was recommended in all focus groups; that would particularly provide guidelines on communicating with social support and health care providers.

Herd owner reference to suicide – determining the appropriate response

Five of the eighteen government veterinarians recalled situations with herd owners where an indication by the herd owner to commit suicide was disclosed to them. The resulting professional challenges in determining the appropriate response are clearly outlined in the following statements:

> That case [of farm animal welfare] was clearly alcoholism… it got worse over a six months stretch. One evening I got a text [SMS] from him saying, 'I might as well kill myself…more dead than alive'. My thoughts were bordering between needing to do something; but I was also thinking, why should he land his problem on me… I'm not a counsellor? (S)

> I talked to him [herd owner] on the phone, and he said he was suicidal. I talked to him for an hour, and then hung up the phone… I wish I could have given him more. (NW)

There were mixed perceptions among the wider participant groups on how such disclosures (of suicide) should be responded to. Six participants explicitly indicated that reference to suicide by the herd owner was more a 'threat', as a means of dissuading government veterinarian's action in response to the farm animal welfare situation, rather than a real intention to commit suicide. The final consensus among all participants was that, determining the seriousness of the situation required individual interpretation, yet this was made difficult in the absence of guidelines on best practice:

> Suicide - does become very judgmental. It's not unusual for someone to say, this fellow is likely to commit suicide. We have to make a judgment call as to whether this is a significant threat, or just a means of getting us to back off. (M)

> There are helplines… If someone tells you they are thinking of suicide, you can talk to them and empathise with them, and offer them these helplines, and/or do you go over to them and pick up the phone and ring the helpline and put them onto it, or if the element of choice is not there, or they're obviously not going to choose it—do you refer it? Do you make it compulsory? What is the best thing to do? (S)

Involvement versus detachment

Involvement versus detachment pertains to the dilemma of balancing attachment to the case, with the legislative requirements as a government veterinarian (i.e., devising and following an exit strategy, which allows for the quickest solution to be reached). Eleven participants explicitly recalled farm animal welfare cases that took a long time to reach a desired solution. The tensions that arise from trying to keep the interests of the herd owner in context, while needing to devise and maintain an exit strategy, are clear from the following quotes:

> … there are welfare cases that you have to investigate, and they can be very protracted, very difficult and take up an awful lot of time…. (NW)

> then you have DAFM wondering, why is he going out the fourth time to this farmer—what about his exit strategy!. (S)

> Our senior management guidance is to devise an exit strategy the first day you go in… which is beautiful in theory. But has zero practicality because these people aren't the sort of people that you can visit once and come back a second time and say the job is finished. There's a lot of management. Frequently there would be 8-10 visits the first year and thereafter probably two visits a year. They're resource intensive. A lot of them are very sad individuals. (M)

Training needs and recommendations

Notably, the government veterinarians in this study all had many years of experience in their roles. Informal support from colleagues was identified as being important for government veterinarians, when and where available; this was not always possible given the busy nature of the veterinarian role. There was general consensus within all focus groups that they did not want specific training to address some of the issues outlined in this paper. Concern was raised that training around providing support to herd owners would blur even further the professional boundaries between human and animal care:

> … we don't need any training, it's not our requirement… basically what we need is a bridge [to other support agencies], rather than training. (NW)

> Training wouldn't qualify us to stand up at the stand [in court] and say this farmer is depressed…we'd be devoured on a witness stand. What training have you got? One day or five days? I think to train us any further—we'd need a psychology degree. A little bit of training could be very dangerous. Bringing in a trained person for the human welfare side of it is where to go. (S)

> If you think a bit of training qualifies you in a case, and you're going along grand, and somebody does commit suicide—you'd have that on your conscience because you thought you were helping him, but yet. The HSE trained person might approach it totally differently… I'd just bring that person in if possible. (M)

DISCUSSION

Overview

This paper identified the professional dilemmas experienced by government veterinarians during their investigations of farm animal welfare incidents that involve herd owners with social, health and or psychological difficulties. The results reveal three related professional dilemmas for government veterinarians as a result: (1) defining professional parameters; (2) determining the

appropriate response and (3) involvement versus detachment. European regulations on farm animal welfare are guided by a largely zoocentric approach (based on the animal's needs), rather than an anthropocentric approach. Evidence from this study shows, however, that government veterinarians seek to assist the herd owner situation in addition to alleviating farm animal suffering.

Defining professional parameters and determining the appropriate response

Members of the veterinary profession contribute to animal care, and also to public health (Arkow 1998, Lowe 2009, British Veterinary Association 2010). In Ireland, government veterinarians have a responsibility to ensure compliance with food safety, animal health and animal welfare regulations in food animal production. Results show that though a minority of government veterinarians emphasise the guiding structure of a legislative framework, for the majority, the human element of farm animal welfare incidents must also be considered. Empathy and interpretation influence the response to the welfare incident. The literature emphasises the importance and benefit of empathy in communication between the veterinarian and the client. Empathy plays a key role in ethical decision making, and empathy towards the animal owner can encourage greater compliance with veterinary recommendations (Shaw and others 2004, Coe and others 2007, Shaw and others 2010, Kanji and others 2012). In this paper, empathy and attachment, in the absence of appropriate guidelines and cross-reporting structures to deal with the human element, presents dilemmas for government veterinarians as, apparent from the data, they are faced with complex human situations without the necessary professional qualifications and supporting structure to address the situation confidently. As evident from participant statements, this is the case when herd owners disclose to government veterinarians the intent to commit suicide. Such experiences reflect the dilemma of deciphering the extent to which government veterinarians should contribute to human care. Given that the farming community is often linked with high rates of suicide (Malmberg and others 1997, Fraser and others 2005, Cleary and others 2012), veterinarian encounters with suicide may be a lot higher than that recorded in this small-scale study.

Yeates (2013) argues that veterinary professionals should adopt appropriate skills to determine the best approach. In this study, government veterinarians did not want additional training (though it is important to note that all participants had years of experience as government inspectors). This does not suggest that they did not need training, but rather it was felt that additional training would possibly blur their professional role even further. Their comments on training reflect difficulties in determining the parameters of their professional role, alongside recognition that a linkage with other support mechanisms is instead, required. Elsewhere, Devitt and others (2013) reported that government veterinarians contacted support agencies with the aim of seeking advice on how best to respond to the human element of farm animal welfare incidents, or seeking actual support provision for the herd owner. There is scope for the strengthening of existing legislative procedures for government veterinarians through the provision of adequate channels to work collaboratively with the appropriate social services. The provision of tailored information and guidelines targeting veterinarians and support services is recommended, as well as a comprehensive structure for relationship-building, planning and cross-reporting between relevant agencies (Devitt and others 2013). However, the challenges identified by Devitt and others (2013) need to be addressed first.

Involvement and detachment

Government veterinarians cited the tensions between the need to devise an exit strategy versus the perceived demands of individual farm animal welfare cases. In one Irish report (P. Flanagan 2007, unpublished), over half the incidents (56 per cent of 494 farm animal welfare incidents) took one to five days of DAFM resources over a period to resolve, 12 per cent took 5–10 days, and 6 per cent took more than 11 days to resolve. Though herd owner cooperation was present in 72 per cent of the incidents, in the remainder (28 per cent), the owner was either unavailable or uncooperative. Similar to the findings of Collins and others (2010) and Kelly and others (2011), a prior history of farm animal welfare problems was present in some incidents. Evident from participant recollections, government veterinarians develop a degree of closeness to the farm situation. Mencl and May (Tong and others 2007) outline that ethical decision making is influenced by moral recognition of the situation and its implications, and social, psychological and physical proximity to the situation. In this paper, it can be argued that an attachment to a farm situation is augmented by the isolated position that government veterinarians find themselves, brought about by the lack of a coordinated, multiagency approach at the point of intervention. As evident from the data, empathy and feelings of attachment and proximity to the human situation in turn influences the decision-making process (through interpretation) of the government veterinarian. Reinisch (2008) advises caution on promoting empathy within the veterinary profession, and instead encourages self-reflection to ensure ethical lines are not being crossed. In their study on farm welfare inspection, Anneberg and others (2013) report that organisational support and the opportunity to meet and reflect with colleagues are favoured by inspectors. Given the economic and resulting resource constraints in Ireland at the time of research, professional reflection on resource input is necessary. The implementation of an 'exist strategy' can assist this process; however, this must not be to the

detriment of human and animal welfare standards, or cause further professional dilemmas.

Recommendations

A sensitive, multiagency approach is required when responding to farm animal welfare incidents that involve complex human factors (Devitt and others, 2013). The EWS provides a collaborative approach to tackling farm animal welfare incidents. The formalisation of an EWS has given much focus to the issue, and the contribution of stakeholder perspectives has to be acknowledged. Devitt and others (2013) reported that confidentiality concerns prevented greater communication and cross-reporting between private veterinarians, support agencies (social and medical) and government veterinarians. The Health Service Executive (HSE), the government agency responsible for the provision of healthcare throughout Ireland, is involved on a pilot basis in a number of regions. In addition to agreement on protocol, there has been a central effort between DAFM and the HSE to advance the EWS. Ongoing efforts are being made to extend involvement to potentially relevant agencies, such as the Local Authority Veterinary Service, the Private Veterinary Practitioners, and An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police).

Evidence from the literature suggests that particular approaches to resolving animal welfare situations can cause animal owners (who hoarded animals) to relapse (Arluke and others 2002, Berry and others 2005), and individualised responses are often required (Steketee and Frost 2007, Arkow and others 2009). Such individualised responses require a strongly coordinated multiagency approach that is flexible enough to meet the needs of individual cases. Yeates (2013) and Anneberg and others (2013) point out that veterinarians can have a vital role in evaluating laws and professional requirements and suggesting improvements. Similar to results reported by Anneberg and others (2013), government veterinarians, in this paper, were of the opinion that because of the complexities of individual responses, attempts to standardise practice would prove difficult. The development of future laws, guidelines and structures should include the perspectives of government veterinarians.

Clearly defined guidelines are required for government veterinarians in their encounters with farm animal welfare incidents where there is a complex human problem. Particularly, practical guidelines can provide a clear structure for professionals to follow in situations where there is a blurring between human and animal care (McGuinness and others 2005). There are international examples, which could be adopted for a government veterinarian context. In 2011, the New Zealand Veterinary Association published 'The Veterinarians Animal Welfare Toolkit' – a set of practical guidelines for veterinarians involved in addressing animal welfare issues on farms. The guidelines remind veterinarians of their professional obligations: how they might become involved, how to engage with the herd owner, and what procedures to follow. Helpful resources and contacts are also included for veterinarians and clients. Similarly, the American Veterinary Medical Association's 'Practical Guidance for the Effective Response by Veterinarians to Suspected Animal Cruelty, Abuse and Neglect' (Arkow and others 2009) provides veterinarians with practical guidelines and tools on how to assess and respond appropriately. Multiagency planning and partnership on farm animal welfare is crucial, with all roles required to understand their responsibilities, and have adequate knowledge and skills to implement these responsibilities (Farm Animal Welfare Council 2009, Rushen and others 2011). Guidelines must be realistically implementable, and when supported by appropriate training and education, should enable veterinarians to form accurate assessments of the animal and human welfare situation (McGuinness and others 2005, British Veterinary Association 2012). As with animal welfare education, the development of guidelines should have at their basis, appropriate understandings of animal welfare science, veterinary ethics, and legislation and policy (such as Professional Codes of Practice), while enabling multiagency coordination. Supporting the recommendations of Main (2010), consideration is required, on how to adequately prepare veterinary students to manage ethical dilemmas in animal welfare investigations (Main 2010).

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The population in this study represents only a small proportion of government veterinarians. Ideally focus groups should continue until saturation is reached, that is, when repetition of opinions occurs between focus groups and nothing new emerges in response to study questions. In this study, there was a high level of repetition in the opinions of government veterinarians; however, it is important to note that these government veterinarians had a particular interest and high level of experience in farm animal welfare investigations. Though each DVO was represented by a government veterinarian, a larger study population would ensure that the possible range of experiences and perceptions are presented, particularly from less experienced government veterinarians.

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