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“Clients. Outdoors. Animals.” A qualitative study of veterinary retention in UK farm practice.

K.E. Adam¹, S. Baillie², J. Rushton³

¹ BVM&S MSc MRCVS. Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Science Technology and Innovation Studies, University of Edinburgh, Old Surgeons’ Hall, High School Yards, Edinburgh EH1 1LZ, United Kingdom. Tel: +44(0)131 650 2449 Email: k.adam@ed.ac.uk

² BSc(Bristol), BVSc(Bristol), PFHEA, MRCVS. Emeritus Professor. Bristol Veterinary School, University of Bristol, Langford House, Langford, Bristol BS40 5DU, United Kingdom. Tel: +44 (0) 117 331 9065 Email: sarah.baillie@bristol.ac.uk

³ MA MAgSci PhD. Professor of Animal Health and Food Systems Economics (N8 Chair). Epidemiology and Population Health. Institute of Infection and Global Health, University of Liverpool, West Derby Street, Liverpool L69 7BE, United Kingdom. Tel: +44 (0)151 794 6113 Email: j.rushton@liverpool.ac.uk

Abstract

Retaining vets in farm practice has been identified as a key strategy to maintain an adequately trained and experienced workforce to provide animal health services for livestock enterprises and government. This qualitative study aimed to explore vets’ experiences of UK farm animal practice and their perceptions of the factors that influenced their career choices. Thematic analysis of free-text survey responses from 187 vets working in farm practice and 141 who had given up farm work identified four main themes: affect (experiences of feeling or emotions), personal life, the job and the bigger picture. Those who stayed in farm practice described satisfaction with their career and enjoyment of physical, outdoor work in rural communities. Choosing to give up farm work was influenced by both personal and professional circumstances, and related frequently to management issues in practice. Veterinary businesses also face challenges from the broader agricultural and veterinary sectors which affect their ability to support and retain vets. The findings presented build on previous quantitative analysis of factors associated with retention, and demonstrate the complexity of individual vets’ career choices.

Introduction

Workforce issues in rural veterinary practice are a major concern in many countries, including the UK. Retaining vets in farm animal practice has been identified as a key strategy to address this issue and maintain an adequate population of trained and experienced vets to provide health services to livestock enterprises and government (Lowe 2009; Ruston and others 2016). A survey was conducted in 2013 to identify the factors associated with retention (Adam, Baillie, & Rushton, 2015). The results demonstrated that factors linked to remaining in farm practice included receiving staff appraisals; coming from a family with a commercial farm; spending more working time with farm animals and being on call with an experienced vet in the first job after graduation. Factors associated with leaving farm practice were having accommodation provided by the practice and an increasing number of years since graduation. However, these results based on the quantitative analysis of the closed questions are limited to the factors that were selected for inclusion in the questionnaire. For this reason, open-ended questions were also included to provide a more detailed insight into vets’ experiences of working in UK farm practices and their related career choices (Boynton and

Greenhalgh, 2004). The analysis presented in this paper is intended to build on the earlier quantitative findings, with the aim of exploring the perceptions of farm animal practitioners of the factors that influenced their career decisions. The findings are likely to be of interest to the veterinary profession as a whole, as part of the evidence base to inform the ongoing discussion around veterinary workforce issues. They may also be of interest to employers with concerns about staff retention in farm practice, and to veterinary students considering a career as farm vets.

The terms “farm practice” or “farm work” are used here to refer to working in either mixed or farm-only practice. At the risk of echoing the ongoing Brexit discussions at the time of writing, but for the sake of clarity and brevity, vets who were working in farm practice when they responded to the survey are referred to as “stayers” and those who had given up farm work are referred to as “leavers”.

Methods

Qualitative research has been used to address a range of important issues in the veterinary sector, including challenges facing the profession (Ruston and others 2016), decision making in disease outbreaks (Christley and others 2013) and communication between vets and clients (Bard and others 2017). It is a flexible and robust approach to addressing complex, human-orientated research questions, based in the perspective of reality as a social construct. Open-ended questions are a common feature of questionnaires and provide respondents with the opportunity to provide additional information, but these responses are frequently not analysed or included in presentations of survey results (Rich and others 2013). They are, however, a rich and valuable source of data, particularly when used to support and enhance the results from the closed questions. There are a range of theoretical frameworks around job retention (Ramlall 2004; Das and Baruah 2013) but none that relate specifically to the veterinary profession, with its unique challenges and rewards. An inductive, data-driven approach to coding and analysis was therefore used in order to identify the main themes around retaining vets in farm animal practice.

Data collection

Data were collected through an online survey on veterinary retention in UK farm animal practice. The details of the survey instrument and sampling approach are described in (Adam and others 2015). At the end of the questionnaire, the vets who had remained in farm practice were asked “Please describe briefly why you have chosen to continue with farm animal work.” Survey respondents who were no longer working with farm animals were asked “Please describe briefly why you chose to give up farm animal work.” These questions aimed to capture vets’ perceived reasons for their decision to remain in or leave farm practice. In addition, stayers were asked “If you could change anything about farm animal work, what would it be?” in order to capture their perceptions of negative aspects of the job and identify constructive ideas to improve retention. Leavers were asked “What, if anything, would have encouraged you to continue with farm work?” to identify factors that may contribute to retention. These additional questions were intended to stimulate reflection on both sides of their career choices, in order to capture the full complexity of the decisions involved. A closed question about negative experiences in practice was followed by an open-ended question for respondents to provide additional information. While not directly related to career decisions, the responses provided relevant insights into the more challenging aspects of farm practice and were therefore included in the analysis.

Data analysis

The free text responses were analysed using thematic analysis, which aims to identify patterns, or themes, which occur within the data (Joffe and Yardley 2004): in this case, the reasons behind vets' career decisions in relation to farm animal practice, as described by the vets themselves. It is a flexible approach to qualitative analysis which can incorporate both theory-driven and data-driven codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The coding was predominantly data-driven, or inductive, in that the themes were mainly developed from the data rather than the researcher's knowledge of the subject or underlying theory.

All coding was carried out manually using QDA Miner Lite software (v2.0.5, Provalis Research, Montreal, Quebec, Canada). The process of analysis of the responses to each question began with data familiarisation while reading through the responses. Primary coding was carried out to identify the reasons behind the respondents' career decisions. Secondary coding involved identifying patterns, or themes, within the primary codes, which were then reapplied to the data to check for validity. This process was repeated as necessary until the researcher was satisfied that the key themes had been identified. Initially, the responses to each question were analysed separately, but common themes were identified across the dataset as a whole.

Results and discussion

A total of 380 useable responses to the survey were received from 231 stayers, consisting of 187 responses to why they stayed and 173 responses to what they would change, and 149 leavers, comprising 141 responses to why they left and 130 responses on what would have encouraged them to stay. Responses relating to negative experiences came from 42 stayers and 40 leavers. Four common, overarching themes were identified: affect, personal life, job and bigger picture.

Affect

The word "affect" is used in psychology to describe people's experiences of feelings or emotions, and respondents' described their emotional responses towards farm practice as an influence on their career decisions. These feelings were predominantly positive among stayers, including enjoyment, satisfaction, and even love for their work. Leavers described negative emotions such as dissatisfaction, boredom, frustration and stress. In general, the feelings described were linked to particular extrinsic aspects of the job, and these contributing factors are explored across the other three themes identified. However, many of stayers stated simply that "*I enjoy it*" or "*I love it*", indicating an intrinsic sense of satisfaction with their work.

The respondents' perceptions of their competence in farm animal practice was a recurring sub-theme relating to affect. Confidence in their abilities supported stayers' sense of satisfaction, while many of leavers felt that they were not good enough at farm work. Aptitude, education, further training, support and experience all contributed to respondent's perceived competence. The ability to make a difference also contributed to respondents' sense of competence and job satisfaction. Stayers felt that they were able to have a positive impact on UK livestock production by helping farmers to build and maintain a successful business, as well as making a broader contribution to animal welfare, the sustainability of British agriculture and the production of safe food. Leavers felt that their work didn't make a difference, or even had a negative impact on animal health and welfare. Staff appraisals were associated with retention in the quantitative analysis, and may be linked to the importance of vets' perceived competence by providing constructive feedback, and perhaps reassurance that employees are doing a good job.

Personal life

This theme encompasses the compatibility of respondents' life outside work with a career in farm practice. The terms "lifestyle" and "work-life balance" were used frequently, emphasising the connections between respondents' working and personal lives. Some stayers described achieving—or aiming to achieve—a work-life balance that worked for them, but many leavers had found this unattainable in farm practice. Stayers valued highly the opportunity to be part of and contribute to their rural community through their role. A background in farming or an earlier interest in agriculture was described by several stayers, and was often linked to their initial motivation to become farm vets, supporting the association between a farming background and retention identified in the quantitative results. Conversely, one respondent who had left farm work described feeling uncomfortable with their identity as the vet in a rural community, and another described a sense of isolation in their rural location, despite growing up in a similar environment.

"Live in a rural area and like to be a part of the local community, agriculture is central to this way of life." (Stayer)

"In a rural community I found it hard to be identified as the vet when I don't identify strongly with it, and began to feel trapped." (Leaver)

Family circumstances were described mainly by leavers. Some respondents had given up, or felt that they would have to give up, farm work when they started a family, due to a lack of support from employers in balancing work and family commitments, and a perceived incompatibility of farm practice with part-time or flexible working. However, one leaver felt that they may have stayed in farm practice if they had had a family and been more settled. Other personal situations such as relationship breakdown or relocating for a partner's career had also led some leavers to a move away from farm work. Leavers in relationships with other vets described the difficulty of balancing two out-of-hours rotas with family life.

Health was also a recurring sub-theme among the leavers' responses. Farm work had affected some respondents' physical health, such as injuries from animals or car accidents, with back injuries given as the reason for two respondents leaving farm practice. Illness and injury unrelated to work had been the reason for a number of respondents leaving farm practice, due to their inability to cope with the physical demands of the job. The increasing difficulty of performing the physical work required in farm practice with increasing age, or doubts about future capability, was a concern. Several leavers had also experienced mental health issues including depression, stress and burnout as a result of their work.

The job

The influence of the nature of the job on retention reflected both intrinsic aspects of the work itself, such as the working environment on farms and the tasks carried out by farm vets, and employment conditions such as pay, working hours and staff management.

"Love the farm vet profession, but the farm vet jobs for employees are shit." (Stayer)

The working environment was mentioned frequently by both stayers and leavers. Cold, wet, dirty and sometimes dangerous working conditions had contributed to leavers' decisions and were identified as challenges by stayers. Poor handling facilities and organisation on farms was widely cited by leavers and identified as an area for desired change by those who stayed, although it was acknowledged that financial limitations on farms imposed constraints. Despite this, many stayers

gained a sense of satisfaction from the physical nature of the job, working outdoors and working with animals, particularly cattle.

“Love being outdoors, seeing the countryside.” (Stayer)

“I hated the work, the people, the hours, the facilities, the poor directions, the awful back roads, the dirty yards, the economics and the pressure. Oh yes and the shit.” (Leaver)

The services provided to farmers provoked diverse responses across the two groups. The vets who had stayed in farm work were generally positive about the shift towards a more preventative, herd-level approach and wanted to see a further move in this direction in the future. However, those who left farm work often felt that the lack of opportunity to use their clinical skills to treat individual animals was not what they wanted from their career, prompting a move into other areas such as companion animal work. Opinions about bovine tuberculosis (bTB/TB) testing were universally negative: both stayers and leavers disliked carrying out testing and many wished to see it outsourced to technicians in the future.

“No TB testing. Least favourite part of the job that is also the most dangerous, and the most likely to get me struck off.” (Stayer)

Mixed practice, as opposed to purely farm practice, offered some additional challenges. In practices with few farm clients where much of the routine farm work was done by senior vets, a lack of exposure to farm work and negative out-of-hours experiences affected some leavers' confidence. Mixed practice may also be seen by new graduates as a way of keeping their career options open, even if they don't plan a long-term career in farm practice. Some stayers appreciated the variety and the demand for experienced mixed vets, while leavers found it hard to balance the needs of farmers and pet owners. One leaver described their ethical discomfort with the differing welfare standards for farm and companion animals:

“On a personal level I found the division between large and small animal work grew so much it was hard to rationalise e.g. two types of analgesia plus anaesthesia for a 5-month cat castrate vs nothing for an 18-month old bullock.” (Leaver)

Good relationships with clients were one of the main sources of job satisfaction for stayers. This appeared to be linked to both the ability to have a positive impact for clients and their animals, and the satisfaction that vets derived from being an important part of an agricultural community. For both stayers and leavers, difficult clients such as farmers who don't listen to advice or have unrealistic expectations of the service their vet can provide, were also cited as a negative aspect of the job.

“You build close relationships with farm clients who value you as a person as well as a professional.” (Stayer)

The attitudes of some farmers towards young, female vets was an additional challenge:

“Initial comments of 'Not a job for a woman', which were overcome and a lot of the prejudice appeared to stem from concern over your safety.” (Stayer)

“The biggest complaint from the farmers was always “where are all the men vets today then?” Sexism was a big hurdle to get over.” (Leaver)

The more extreme negative experiences described by both groups of respondents related to confrontations with clients, sometimes in relation to TB testing. Perhaps surprisingly, these situations were described by both stayers and leavers and did not appear to have caused the stayers to reconsider their career choices:

“Threatened by farmer (“want to bash your head in if you don't get off my farm”) because of [a result] on a TB test.” (Stayer)

“Farmer tried to drive off in a tractor attached to a calf still inside the cow, then tried to drive over me when I intervened. He threatened me and I found out later that he'd murdered his first wife. I miss large animal practice.” (Leaver)

“Life has been a hoot.... saved some, killed some, had at least two fist fights with clients, who, incidentally, are still clients... wouldn't have changed a second of it.” (Stayer)

Out-of-hours work was almost universally felt to be a negative aspect of farm practice across both groups. Some leavers described suffering from exhaustion as a result of their working hours:

“1 in 2 rota, up all night calving cows, all weekend from Friday morning through to Tuesday evening at 7pm (routinely did Monday night as night of week on call) was just ridiculous.” (Leaver)

However, one leaver mentioned a lack of out-of-hours work as contributing to their decision due to lack of confidence in dealing with emergencies. Particularly among the stayers, there was an acknowledgement that out-of-hours work was an unavoidable aspect of the job, but that management practices such as time off in lieu would help to make it more acceptable.

“Less/no on call (but someone has to do it!) So not possible on a universal basis.” (Stayer)

Employment conditions such as poor pay and long, antisocial working hours were given as the reason for their decision by many leavers. Many stayers described similar circumstances as desired areas for change but had not altered their career path as a result. Issues with staff management were described mainly by leavers, such as a sense of not feeling appreciated, or even bullying from employers. A lack of flexibility or understanding of employees facing challenging personal circumstances was also described. Opportunities for professional growth and career progression were important to employees – some stayers were motivated by the prospect of partnership, while some leavers saw that as the only option open to them and chose to pursue a different path as a result.

Support in the transition into practice after graduation was identified as an important factor for retention by many of the respondents. Several leavers and employers felt that better training at university would also help retention in farm practice. However, some employers reported that new graduates' expectations of support in practice were unrealistic. One employer described the importance of broader life skills and experience:

“A farm is a lonely place for someone who has had no life experience of dealing with people, every student should work as a barman before qualifying!” (Stayer)

Several respondents framed their decisions in terms of the positive (for leavers) or negative (for stayers) aspects of alternative areas of veterinary work, including small animal practice, equine practice, research and industry. Only one respondent had left the veterinary profession entirely, reflecting the difficulty of accessing this group. Stayers described their dissatisfaction with aspects of companion animal practice, such as the more emotionally and less economically driven approach of

pet owners. Leavers described a greater interest or stronger skills in other areas, or found that other career paths were more compatible with their personal life.

“Don't like horse owners, don't like dog muck.” (Stayer)

“The thought of being stuck inside the clinic all day fills me with horror.” (Stayer)

*“I swapped over to the dark side and am a very happy, satisfied, non-stinky smallies vet.”
(Leaver)*

The bigger picture

The fourth and final theme identified related to factors influencing retention beyond the personal and professional sphere of the individual vet. The decision to continue with or give up farm work was not always personal, but sometimes driven by business decisions at a practice level. Difficulties with recruiting and retaining assistants to do farm work were described, indicating a vicious circle of declining number of farm practitioners. Several of those who stayed stated that they did farm work as it was an important part of their mixed practice, while some leavers had done so due to their employer or their business giving up farm work as it was no longer financially viable for the business to continue to provide farm animal services. Broader social, political and economic factors within the livestock sector, such as the decline in the number of farms and livestock, are ongoing challenges, and some leavers stated that they could not see a future for farm work in light of these changes. The financial constraints on many farmers reduce demand for veterinary services and contribute to the practical problems identified in other themes, such as unsafe handling facilities and vets' frustrations at being unable to provide optimal treatment. Major disease outbreaks had affected some vets severely and left them disillusioned with their career path. These crises also impacted on the younger generation of vets involved – one leaver had had minimal support in their first job while the senior vets were dealing with the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak. Several respondents commented negatively on the effectiveness of animal health policy, particularly in relation to TB, and felt that government needed to play a stronger role in leading disease control and promoting the role of the farm vet.

“TB testing - it is a political nightmare which is getting worse” (Stayer)

“I wish there was an organised farm animal health service using private vets to do proper disease control work. (That would help to get rid of bTB much better than shooting badgers!)” (Stayer)

There are links between these broader issues and respondents' sense of competence and satisfaction identified in the “affect” theme. An awareness and feeling of connection to the farming sector and food production, despite the ongoing changes, appears to be critical to retain vets in farm practice:

*“It's a real job, putting food on plates and making a real difference to clients' livelihoods.”
(Stayer)*

Conclusions

The stayers' responses demonstrate that farm animal practice can provide an enjoyable, fulfilling career and way of life, given the right circumstances. Farm practice isn't for everyone and remains a minority activity within the profession – the 2014 RCVS Survey of the Profession showed that only 3.7% of vets work in farm-only practice and 15.8% in mixed practice (Buzzeo and others 2014). With increasing numbers of talented, committed veterinary graduates from the UK veterinary schools,

there is huge potential for some of them to build and sustain satisfying careers in farm practice. There is a risk that the findings presented may paint an overly negative picture of farm practice, as the leavers' responses were generally more detailed than those of the stayers and one of the questions asked related specifically to negative experiences. However, the responses do highlight some serious issues to be addressed in farm practice, mainly relating to work-life balance, working conditions and staff management. For most people, their health, wellbeing and family are more important than their job. If their work is incompatible with these basic human needs, they will quite understandably seek a different career path.

The different emotional responses between the stayers and leavers to what may appear to be similar extrinsic circumstances may indicate variations in resilience. The results of this study confirm that poor mental health and wellbeing affect some vets in farm practice. The veterinary profession has acknowledged and begun to address these issues in recent years which is a positive step forward. There has been a particular focus on increasing resilience and providing vets with strategies to cope with the stresses of the job. However, it is important not to place the onus on the individual to deal with systemic and organisational difficulties. Initiatives to improve resilience should be complementary, rather than a substitute, to addressing the extrinsic challenges identified. Ultimately, working reasonable hours for fair pay in a supportive environment is likely to have the greatest positive impact on veterinary wellbeing.

The pressures on rural veterinary businesses as a result of ongoing changes in the veterinary and agricultural sectors are also highly relevant (Adam and others 2014; Ruston and others 2016). The ongoing shrinkage of livestock agriculture in the UK and the financial pressure on farmers will affect the market for veterinary services and the resources available to employers to improve vets' working conditions. The looming challenge of Brexit may affect agricultural subsidies and the veterinary workforce, if European vets are unable to work in the UK. It should be noted that the data in this study were collected in 2013, and for many of the leavers, relate to their experience of farm work years or even decades earlier. There have been major shifts in the farm animal veterinary business landscape, including the rapid expansion of corporate business models in farm practice, which may have the potential to address many of the issues raised such as practice management and rotas. Given the study findings, these practices could be part of the answer to retaining vets in farm practice. The question remains: how can farm animal veterinary practices meet the needs of their staff and their clients?

Further research is needed to identify constructive solutions, including more in-depth understanding of how employers retain staff successfully and employees' perceptions of a fulfilling and sustainable career as a farm vet. Some practices have taken a proactive approach to addressing issues around retention and recruitment by considering generational differences and the needs of their employees and implementing innovative approaches to staff management (Allcock 2016). These strategies are feasible in large, farm-only practices in areas of high livestock density, but may be impractical in smaller, mixed practices in more remote areas.

The findings presented here support and add depth to the results from the quantitative analysis of the closed questions (Adam and others 2015), and provide an insight into the lived experiences of farm vets in the UK. Staff are the most important asset of any business, and recruiting and retaining good vets is central to a successful practice. To borrow a quote attributed to Richard Branson, *"Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."* However, employers must have the necessary resources and expertise to make this happen.

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