

## **INTERFACE BETWEEN THE VETERINARIAN AND THE DEER FARMER**

**CLIVE JERMY, NZDFA PRESIDENT**

The mainstream general relationship between a deer farmer and his veterinarian, like any other farmer vet relationship, is one of a lay person engaging a professional, commercially for services rendered in their particular field of expertise.

No different if you like to engaging a solicitor or accountant to perform tasks that I cannot perform myself.

In my deer industry career, going back to 1977 as a farmer and consultant, I have had the opportunity to engage the professional services of many veterinarians, including sending vets overseas to carry out embryo collection work.

I have always found, in my own case, that relationships have been good ones, as any good professional will command the respect of those for whom they provide a service for.

I am sure that generally this view and experience is shared by a clear majority of farmers and veterinarians alike. Certainly there will be variations to that theme.

Many of you will be specialist experts in various fields such as small animals, equine, deer, genetic engineering and so on. Likewise, you will all have experienced farmers who thought they could fix a problem and have failed so then calls his vet. Sometimes too late and sometimes grumpy about costs and so on, but in the main, he is still recognising the professional.

All of these factors, I am sure, run true across the wider farming community and deer farming is no different. Or is it?

While the relationship between you, as professionals, and farmer clients runs across all farming, the deer industry is at the very least unique in many respects.

It is a young industry, only 20 years old and the likelihood is that many vet practices would have only had the deer industry as part of their activity during the last 10-15 years.

It is perhaps a truly New Zealand experience, meaning it was never likely to ever have developed anywhere else in the world.

That special blend of pioneering spirit, entrepreneurs, aviators, and "give it a go" attitude created this industry.



I would like to think that a special bond between vets and deer farmers developed in those early years as we were learning how to farm them while you were learning how to treat them, developed hand in glove with each other.

How do we feed them, handle them, and make them grow, went side by side with what diseases do deer get, what parasites do they get, velveting techniques and so on.

So to a certain extent, we have grown up together, all learning as we go and that has to be recognised.

Farmer and vet relationships today depend on the quality of skills you provide, with a mix of people skills or PR, that dictates the level of respect you command from the farming community.

This will always be the case for the future and now deer farming is part of the mainstream, perhaps those special bonds between us will fade somewhat as our industry leaves behind the trials and tribulations we experienced together when the industry was first developed.

So what about the future?

Is the role of the veterinarian to change and what effect will that have on the traditional commercial professional relationships?

Like most sectors, I believe deregulation is having a profound effect on the veterinary profession. The deregulated environment is creating tension between the opportunities and pressures of a new commercialism, and the historical expectations of a highly trained and respected profession.

Historically, the veterinary profession has played a pivotal role in regulating animal health, disease and food standards for agriculture. In a sort of paternalistic way it was accepted that vets, like their legal and accounting and other professional colleagues, should determine what is right for society. Regulation of animal health and food safety and market access issues were largely the domain of veterinary professionals and Government officials.

But deregulation, and a more enlightened approach to our markets, is changing all that. Clearly, and increasingly, programmes are industry driven based on market needs and commercial reality, and the vets role is changing from one of protector to professional advisor.

In researching this paper, I reviewed suggestions that the profession may be considering various options for the future to look at opportunities that may or should be taken in this new commercial environment.

For example, should the profession develop a broader expertise to offer better advice and effect technology transfer to farmer clients?

Is there a role for the veterinarian as a farm advisor?

From my perspective as a farmer, I would say yes, there is a large gap today in advisory services for the deer industry.

Case in point, many years ago MAF used to put out a series of fact sheets called AG Links. These papers were very valuable to me in my consultancy days.

We have not had them for a very long time and nothing has been developed to take their place.

In the early years the focus of such technology tended to be more production and management orientated. However, the technical developments of the last 10 or more years have been far greater than the first 10 years from a scientific point of view.

Yet, in reality there are very few methods of transfer available.

The Deer Farmers Association intends to develop a series of fact sheets to start a process of making information available to deer farmers, but your profession also can capitalise on the void that is there today.

Be it one on one vet to client, through workshops and/or small on-farm seminars, or through newsletters, there are certainly plenty of methods available to you.

As far as subject matter is concerned, I believe, provided you can make a clear distinction between your own professional expertise as against the farmers on-farm management role, there should be no difficulties at all.

Preventative medicine for example, including parasite control, when, why and how?

Vaccination programmes, when and why?

Yersiniosis and other diseases, when, why and how to prevent them. Breeding technology, such as AI and embryo transfer. There are many such areas to consider and develop.

The advances in AI over the last few years have seen results up to 80 percent conception now. Yet, many deer farmers regard this work with some suspicion because they believe or have only heard of 50 percent conception and sometimes less.

Your role in advising farmers of not only the benefits but the management to assist in a successful programme can be very important.

There are but a handful of people that actually carry out such work and yet AI and embryo transfer is the cheapest and most effective way to advance production which is dollars in farmers pockets.

Only the people who actually sell semen and embryos promote this technology, and in many cases farmers don't use it because there is no-one locally who can do it for them and they are concerned at the costs of importing a technician.

Take the work of our research institutes as another example.

Millions of dollars are spent on research annually in our industry.

We used to be well informed of such work.

Who today supplies or where today can producers access the outcomes of all of the research and development that goes on that would directly benefit them and the industry?

Truthfully, this area of technology transfer is woefully lacking.

There is no formal or even informal systems of technology transfer today that is readily available.

Who better to provide this service to producers, where applicable and relevant, than your profession.

Now I fully appreciate that many veterinarians and their practices do already communicate to their clients various aspects of what I've mentioned here, especially preventative medicine.

However, the point I am making is that during the last few years there has been massive restructuring in the area of MAF, Research Institutes, etc, and during this restructuring the area of technology transfer has, from my perspective, slipped through the cracks somewhat.

I believe that along with management consultants, there is a role to play here for the veterinary profession that would be welcomed by your clients.

To utilise your professional commercial relationship with your farmer clients, to aid and enhance his production, which ultimately benefits both of you.

Vets are quite rightly taking advantage of these many commercial opportunities that are becoming available in our less regulated environment, and that's as farmers would expect. What they are uneasy with though, is the potential for your traditional role as a veterinary expert, in setting standards and procedures for compulsory schemes, to create commercial advantage. I say perception because in most instances that's what it is, but in the eyes of the beholder, perception is reality, and that's a situation you cannot afford.

We saw a classic example of this perceived conflict in the introduction of the "Farmer Removal of Velvet Training Scheme".

Here was a scheme, that without the co-operation of your industry, would not have got to the ground.

Without the co-operation of your industry we would not have a "Code of Conduct for the Removal of Velvet".

Your industry had the most to lose financially by forfeiting velveting to lay people.

However, did the deer farmer recognise that, did he appreciate that, was your contribution as a profession recognised, acknowledged and appreciated?

In the main, the answer sadly was no.

I said in my President's report to the Deer Farmers Association AGM and I quote:

"The consultation process of this programme with producers was badly managed and the penalty was a severe reaction to the programme that nearly derailed it. It was the catalyst that saw the creation of the Levy Payers Society."

Most unfortunately, the years of very good work that developed the unique Code of Conduct for the Removal of Velvet and the major concession of farmer access to drugs, were lost in the confusion and bitterness about the programme.

I also said that the NVSB, the NZDFA and the Deer Branch of the NZVA now have an opportunity to demonstrate to the industry, that we have learnt lessons, and must be mindful of those lessons as we negotiate and communicate over submissions to the scheme.

I also in that report acknowledged that the scheme could not have been implemented without the co-operation of your profession.

So where did we go wrong, and what can we learn from this experience for the future, because if we haven't learnt anything, then history will repeat itself and neither your industry nor ours can afford that outcome.

Fundamentally, in my opinion, any scheme that has hidden benefits and not visible benefits, that combines the element of semi-compulsion or compulsion, that in turn costs money again compulsorily, is always going to be hard work for those trying to implement it.

For many farmers the threat of non tariff trade barriers on welfare grounds was an invisible threat and never urgent.

For farmers who already had access to drugs, it was an imposition of additional costs, a blight on his own skills, vets he didn't know were going to come and judge him when he felt he didn't need to if his own vet was happy with his level of skills.

For farmers who did not have access to drugs, the scheme had benefits, but again cost in the short term having to go off and sit exams, be assessed by people he did not know, for reasons such as we cannot have farmers coercing their own vet because they know him too well, was perceived as insulting and the list goes on. There was not proper consultation. Decisions were being made ad hoc and figures were quoted to farmers pertaining to costs without prior agreement.

In the end the damage done to the reputation of your profession and to my organisation was very substantial and it's not over yet.

Your profession does not deserve blame for managing the scheme as much as all of us involved let both sides down.

However, what must be recognised is the conflict of interest, even if it is a perception, where a commercial role is clouded by combining a regulatory role.

Farmers see their vets as professionals not regulators.

The velvet scheme fudged the issue where the vet sells his expertise commercially and also in acting as a regulator and seen as fighting for tough regulations in the scheme.

And, as I have already said, the contribution that your profession made to make this scheme work was sadly lost to a large extent in the early and middle stages.

On the horizon, and perhaps the next issue that has similarities to the velvet training scheme, is the Tb scheme.

There is no question in my mind, that the veterinary profession obviously has a lot to offer the administrators of the Tb scheme. To avoid commercial conflicts, however, you may want to reflect on the nature of that involvement. Why not offer your expertise and experience in an advisory capacity to the agencies like the Animal Health Board, that manage and regulate the schemes, rather than seeking a direct involvement yourselves. That way you can freely pursue the commercial opportunities which present themselves without fear of conflict of interest. And here I am sure there are many opportunities.

In the area of Tb testing for instance, no doubt there is frustration when MAF are competing for testing at \$40.00 per hour against commercial vets at \$80.00-\$100.00 per hour, while at the same time MAF are asking your profession to introduce a quality assurance programme which may involve the auditing of practitioners. Against this, it must be very tempting, to seek a direct say in the regulation and administration of the scheme. But if your role is providing a professional commercial service, perhaps there is a commercial answer. Maybe it is possible to train lay people to work for you to do the Tb testing and charge them out competitively.

I have never yet met a veterinarian who enjoys Tb testing. It hardly tests your trained skills as doctors of animals.

Do you need a direct degree of regulatory control of the scheme putting yourself again in the position of a conflict of interest between commercial services provided and regulations?

The position currently where vets do Tb testing according to rules and regulations imposed by the Government through MAF, maintains the veterinarian as a professional doing his\her appropriate job.

Perhaps let MAF and the Animal Health Board make the rules.

Again, if the issue is protecting the functions normally carried out by you from the threat of commercial competition, then look at ways and means to meet that competition head on and compete.

I for one, and I am sure many farmers would share my view, will always rather prefer to have my vet treating my deer, a person I respect and have faith in, than someone I don't know who just as likely may not have a level of expertise with animals that I am happy with.

However, it is not for me to advise your industry in the roles it may take in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I can only talk to you today as a lay person and a farmer.

To sum up my feelings, I believe that my veterinarian has a role providing me with professional services.

I welcome him or his practice broadening their services and skills to make me aware of technical issues that can assist my management and production.

I believe a very large majority of all farmers would welcome their vets providing a broader more effective service and would be happy to pay for it providing there is clear separation between my job and his.

I do have concerns if your profession, like any other, combines the role of providing commercial services with regulators and administrators as well.

This may be unavoidable in the future as you compete in a changing world.

So if, and when that happens, that path down the middle must be trod very carefully, so as not to lose the unique and special relationships you have with your client base, nor compromise the high standards of integrity that your industry has developed.