



Title Seeing things from a farmers point of view

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- Hello, my name is Philip Robinson, and I'm speaking about seeing things from a farmer's point of view. So I qualified as a vet from the University of Glasgow in 1996. I worked in mixed general practise for two and a half years. I then joined the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Veterinary Service in Northern Ireland in 1999. And I was in the veterinary service for 12 years and I've been in academia for the past 10 years. So I'm currently the head of the Department of Veterinary Health and Animal Sciences at Harper Adams University. I'm a vet with a special interest in social science and I have a PhD in Human Geography from Durham University. I'm also a recognised specialist in State Veterinary Medicine.

So these are the learning objectives for this particular talk. So by the end of this module, I hope that you will be able to further appreciate the dynamics of the vet-farmer relationship. That you actively seek and listen to farmers' perspectives on animal husbandry and health in your interactions with them. And that you will be able to think about considering farmers' rationales for antimicrobial use and the need to co-construct an anti-microbial stewardship plan.

So this graphic looks at livestock health. And I'm thinking here, particularly of all the different stakeholders who are involved in maintaining and promoting livestock health. And obviously we have farmers in our green circle here who are absolutely fundamental to livestock health. They are the people who care for the livestock on a daily basis. They're the ones who often administer treatments. They're the ones who feed them and are responsible for their husbandry and general management. And farmers are absolutely fundamental to livestock health. And obviously we as vets are also fundamental to livestock health. We are professional expert advisers on livestock health. And we're thinking particularly in this talk about the interaction between farmers and vets. But it's also important to bear in mind that there are other stakeholders who are also involved in livestock health in various ways. And these are certainly not all of the stakeholders, but I would suggest these are important stakeholders as well. Scientific researchers, regulators, the pharmaceutical industry and nutritionists. And all of these stakeholders work together to promote livestock health. But as I said, we're especially focusing here on the relationship between farmers and livestock and vets and livestock and the relationship between vets and farmers.

So here we have, photographs of a farmer and of a vet. And we're thinking about the relationship between the two stakeholders. And if you're working in practise, you will know that communication can sometimes be challenging between farmers and vets. And we can feel that we are giving advice and we're giving good advice, we're giving expert advice, but sometimes we can feel frustrated that the advice doesn't seem to be having the desired effect. And sometimes we ask ourselves, is the message getting through? And it seems to be that with some farmers, that the message that we've repeated many times over doesn't seem to be having the impact that we would like, and we wonder if they're actually listening to us. And we wonder why we see the same problems year after year on

the same farms. And this is illustrated by this particular interview excerpt from an interview that I did with a vet in Shropshire about Johne's disease control. This vet was expressing her frustration, by trying to persuade some of her farm clients to take Johne's disease more seriously on the farm. And she said, "It's hard work as vets constantly pushing and pushing. You feel like you're constantly nagging them to do something that they're really resisting." Can you identify with this? It may not be about Johne's disease but it could be any other topic concerning livestock health or any kind of change that you're trying to institute on your farmer's farm. And so, I would suggest that we need to think more about our communication strategies and we need to move away from the kind of the megaphone diplomacy where we feel as if we're trying to nag the farmer or push them into doing something that they're resisting. And perhaps we need to do more listening instead.

On the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw said that, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." So we need to ask ourselves, is this something that's happening with my interaction with my farm clients? Maybe not with all of them but maybe with some of them. Do we think that we have communicated with them, but is it just an illusion? And actually just like in the photograph, the message is not being received. So when it comes to relationships between farmers and their expert advisors, we know that there are challenges in communication. And if we look in the literature, the scientific literature especially in the social science literature, we can see that this is not just a challenge for vets, but it's also a challenge for other expert advisors who work with farmers. And we have to ask the question why? Well first of all the literature shows us that we may have different knowledges. We may be speaking different languages. Well, you say, what do you mean? We're all communicating in the same language. We're all speaking English and yet the message doesn't seem to be getting through. But we have to reflect and think about, what's the farmer's knowledge and how does that compare to my knowledge as a vet. And I'm I communicating in a way or using terminology or scientific terminology, that to the farmer seems to be a different language that they just can't grasp. We also need to reflect on the power imbalances and what's called the politics of expertise. So thinking about lay expertise versus professional expertise. And we can see ourselves as vets as the professionals, but we have to recognise that farmers have their own expertise. They may have a degree in agriculture or they may have no formal training. But that doesn't mean to say they don't have their own expertise. They may have been farming for 40 or 50 years, and they have developed an expertise, which we need to recognise and respect. And so we need to have that mutual respect and engagement of different, but mutually beneficial epistemologies.

Epistemologies are ways of framing the world knowledge viewpoints, sets of knowledge. And we have to recognise that farmers have their own knowledge systems that we need to respect, we need to engage with, we need to understand and that involves more listening. And these are the papers that are examples of this and these are all listed in the references section at the end of the presentation.

So I'm going now to provide a series of interview excerpts from interviews that I have been involved with with farmers in Northern Ireland. And this was the subject of my PhD where I interviewed farmers and vets and other stakeholders on bovine tuberculosis control. But I think these points are relevant and illustrate these issues which are also relevant to anti-microbial stewardship. And so the first point is that, we need to think about farmer views on veterinary advice. What the farmers think of vets and what we say to them, what we suggest to them? So here I asked this dairy farmer in County Antrim. "And would you trust your vets advice." And the farmer replied, "Well, usually, yes. They're supposed to know what they're talking about." And then he laughed. So there's a sense of humour coming through here, but I think it's half a joke. And we need to ask ourselves, do we know

what we're talking about? Well, hopefully we do. But how did the farmers view us? Do they recognise, do they respect our viewpoint? Well perhaps not always. And another quote this time the farmer said, "You listen to the vet and you take on board what they're saying, but sometimes you just do your own thing anyway." So going back to the illustration about the megaphone, we seem to be, putting forward our point of view, and the farmer may seem to take it on board, but for whatever reason, they decide to reject that advice and they do their own thing anyway. And that intrigues me, I'm interested in why people do what they do and I want to find out what their rationale is. What would their rationale be for doing their own thing anyway? We need to remember that farmers have confidence in their own abilities. So here I ask, "Would that affect your business if there were fewer vets on the ground?" And the farmer replies, "Probably not because nine times out of 10, if you can't cure something yourself, a vet will not cure it either." And began a sense of humour and laughing after they've made the statement. So here they're recognising that with years of experience, they can recognise and diagnose lots of common problems on a farm. And if they're stumped and they're confused, then they think that there's a good chance that the vet will be as well. And maybe we need to be more humble and accept that that is often the case. We don't always know and often we need to depend on further diagnostics. So farmers have confidence in their own abilities. And this farmer talked about his use of vaccination. He said, "Well, we vaccinate for nearly everything under the sun and plan to that extent." So was interested in what he based that vaccination plan on. "So how did you plan that? Was the vet involved?" "We did that ourselves, and I suppose the vet was a bit involved too. You read about it." And so here the vet, wasn't perhaps as involved in the vaccination plan, as we might expect. And this came through very strongly in a number of interviews about farmers doing their own research, reading the farming press, reading articles on the internet, talking to other farmers, as well as talking to the vet.

And so we need to recognise that farmers will seek advice from multiple sources. And we may as vets, just be one source of information and a competing knowledge set that they tap into. What farmers do learn from vets? And this is illustrated in this quote. This farmer said, "I think paying the vet for their time might be a good idea rather than paying for a visit. If it's something quick, he's in and out and away again. I'm good at having something in my head and whenever he's here doing something, I would be asking him about something else, trying to pick up a bit of information." Now this farmer came across as being very keen to learn. He had a thirst for knowledge and here he illustrates that he recognises the vets' knowledge and expertise and he's always trying to tap into it, trying to get as much information extracted as possible. Do you recognise that? And another illustration this time I say, "Would you say that you were good at picking out sick animals and guessing what's wrong with them? Would you try to treat some of them yourself?" And the farmer said, "Over the years, the vets have explained what antibiotic to use. It saves them taking time out of their schedule for a relatively simple case. They've given me different tips over the years on what to look for, and if I'm not happy we would call the vet." So here's specifically in relation to antibiotic use. The farmer recognises that he's picked up tips over the year from the vet and feels as if they are merely following the vet's instructions or past advice. But here we have to ask ourselves a question as vets, are we too busy to listen? I suggested earlier we need to do more listening. And this farmer said, "He's usually so busy when he comes in, and the phone never stops ringing from when he comes in until he leaves. And he hasn't really enough time to sit down and have a good conversation with you unless you just corner him." So I say, "Do you wish you had more time to talk to the vet?" "Yes, I could learn a lot from him because I know he's smart." So does this describe you? Are you always in such a rush that you don't have time to talk to your farm client to find out what they're doing? Maybe just to engage in that small talk, which may lead into a more in-depth discussion seeking to understand their perspective, as well as offering your own opinion and your own advice.

So when it comes to decision-making in context this paper by Kristensen and Jakobsen called, "Challenging the myth of the irrational dairy farmer," suggests, "It's impossible to provide one-size-fits-all consultancy because the best decision depends heavily on the internal logic and the context-bound reality on each dairy farm." So one-size-fits-all advice is unlikely to succeed. We need to think much more about the individual farmer and the individual farm. And so I suggest that you need to listen and reflect before providing advice on each and every farm. And then if we look at communication in context, this paper by Skjølstrup et al. suggest that, "Farmers and veterinarians must communicate better to understand each other's perspectives and establish common goals within the collaboration, if they are to work efficiently, to reduce antimicrobial use." So what's your communication like with your farm clients? Are you seeking to understand the farmer's perspective? Are you seeking to establish common goals and work in a collaborative manner so that you can work together with the farmers to reduce and to refine antimicrobial use? So you need to come to an agreed consensus on the way forward.

So where do we sum up? Better antimicrobial stewardship requires, a particular need to understand the farmer's perspective. Taking time to listen and to understand. And to ask these questions, what are they doing and why? And that takes time to listen, to ask the right questions, to seek to understand, to show willingness to engage and to listen and to recognise, their expertise. And so we must have that mutual respect of knowledge and expertise. I'm not suggesting by any means that farmers are always right, but we need to listen to what they think and find out what the rationale is if we want to be able to, point in a different direction or help a farmer to refine or improve. And when it comes to an anti-microbial stewardship plan, I would suggest we need to co-construct this with our farm clients on a mega plan that's suitable and tailored to that particular farm and that particular client. And this needs ongoing review and refinement over time. Just because we made a plan today doesn't mean that that plan will just be exactly the same in six months time or a year's time or five years' time. We need to review the plan and to refine it over time in collaboration and communication, and active communication with the farmer.

So these are the references that I provided in this presentation, and these are suggestions for further reading. These four are all papers that I've been involved in writing either myself or with colleagues. There are four different topics, but these all illustrate the importance and the usefulness of seeing things from the farmer's perspective.

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