

**BVA CONGRESS, THE LONDON VET SHOW 2015**

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**Session title: What's the role of the vet in a world that eats less meat?**

***Summary: Farm animal welfare is quickly rising up the corporate agenda. What business risks and opportunities does it pose? And what are the implications for a world that eats less meat?***

Abstract: Farm animal welfare is rising rapidly up the corporate agenda. Where welfare may once have been a 'nice to have' at best, and irrelevant at worst, today companies from all sectors – retailers, manufacturers, and food service companies – are paying attention to this issue, viewing it both as a strategic necessity and an ethical imperative.

For Compassion in World Farming ('Compassion'), animal welfare is about ensuring that individual animals have what they want and need. To ensure an animal has a high level of welfare, it is important to consider three separate but overlapping aspects: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and the ability to express natural behaviour – all of which can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively, and all of which are achievable at a commercial scale. Compassion's Food Business team works with companies to embed higher animal welfare practices at the heart of the corporate agenda, recognising and rewarding good practice.

There's no one 'business case' for companies to address farm animal welfare; rather there are myriad different drivers. For many, particularly those businesses at the early stages of engaging with the issue, the potential risks posed by exposure of poor practice in the media are paramount. For others, taking a long-term view makes clear that higher welfare systems are a more future-proof investment than caged farming systems that legislation may well render obsolete within a few years.

Less obviously perhaps, investors are another key driver. Investors are considering the risks and opportunity posed by farm animal welfare, and in turn they are asking the companies in which they invest to ensure robust management of this issue. The *Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare* is a key tool for investors, publicly ranking 90 of the world's largest food companies on their management, policy commitment and disclosure of farm animal welfare.

Consumers are of course another big part of the picture, and an important driver. Whilst stated concern (in the UK for example, 79% of consumers in a 2013 study said they are concerned about the welfare of the meat and dairy they buy) does not always translate into purchasing patterns, concerns are beginning to filter through at the till. Higher welfare eggs are leading the way here with the volume of cage-free eggs purchased by consumers growing from 12% in 1994 to 48% in 2014, with a peak in 2012 of 51% (Defra).

As well as seeking out higher welfare products, many people are embracing a 'flexitarian' lifestyle – i.e. plant-based diets with only the occasional inclusion of meat. A recent YouGov survey of the British Public also showed that shunning meat completely is an option (for many young people in particular). The food industry is beginning to take advantage of this trend, offering tasty vegetarian or vegan options that provide consumers with choice.

All this doesn't mean that that we're on a trajectory towards a meat-free world. But a world where we eat less, but 'better' (i.e. higher welfare) meat is both a distinct possibility and, arguably, an imperative, if we are to raise livestock both sustainably and humanely. So what does this mean for the role of the vet on farm?

It means the opportunity to provide a higher level of welfare in less intensive systems. These systems are likely to afford the animals more space and higher levels of enrichment, and to be able to operate without the routine prophylactic use of antibiotics or the need for routine mutilations.

Herd health planning is increasingly recognised as a key role of vets and this is where the maximum impact on health and welfare is likely to be had in the future. Advice on breeding for robustness, and how to monitor meaningful welfare outcome measures, may also become a more significant part of the vet's role.

Looking ahead, we can expect an ever-greater emphasis on positive management rather than curative treatment. What does this mean for the veterinary business? In order to decouple veterinary profit from volume of medical intervention (i.e. sales of drugs), numerous practices are already exploring retainer based models. It's entirely reasonable to suppose that this sort of system will become predominant in a world where consumers eat less meat, and higher welfare (potentially of fewer animals) is increasingly important on farm.