

Rain had been falling steadily all night. The lorry carrying the sheep had been loaded and the only person remaining in the early morning gloom was the vet sitting under the tailgate removing his waterproofs. No buildings were visible and the gateway was a quagmire of clay and mud. No bucket of hot water, soap and towel that was always available for James Herriot! Tucked under his sweater the vet was protecting fourteen damp sheets of paper relating to the transfer of the pregnant ewes on welfare grounds. This was one of the early licences and the administration had not been easy. All parties fumbling with uncertainties. The car phone brought news of another farm 'going down'. The morning ahead was laced with expected contact from neighbouring clients. Does a river between the farms remove the likelihood of slaughter? The adjacent land has not carried stock. Can slaughter be avoided? 'I don't mind telling you' said the vet 'this whole business is getting to the farmers and it's getting to me too'.

When a farmer makes contact there is a natural desire to support a valued client. The FMD call from the farmer who is known to use at least three practices at a whim, adds another dimension to the term natural selection. Why me? The lady with five goats is just as anxious, and possibly less receptive, than the 'proper' farmer. All lean towards their vet for knowledge and help. All utilise resources and all ask the vet to share their anguish.

The share of emotional support taken by clients is not even. For some in practice the load is light but for others it is an intense personal pressure of anxiety and uncertainty. The future for business and the likely shape of the local agricultural scene is a problem to be shared by all practices at a later time. The pressure on some vets to 'get out' will be as acutely felt as the farmer who is unable to resurrect his holding.

Many are wondering whether there is a right way to react to someone suffering from FMD burn out. Easy answers are not on offer. Different actions are prompted by an angry man, or woman, than by a person who is quiet and introspective with an aura of doom and gloom. It would be sensible for all vets and farmers to have an MOT at the local medical practice, so that they know that they are fit to face stress. It is unsettling to have a tight chest and not know whether it is muscle contraction through anxiety or heart pain. But how many will have that check-up?

If preventive medicine has not been effective then there are fire brigade type services available. Many telephone calls have been made to the crisis networks. It is common for these calls to be placed about someone else by family members, neighbours and concerned individuals. The response is nearly always beneficial. Beneficial to the caller immediately. They step away from the 'phone feeling that they have done something worthwhile. This is the skill of those with a listening ear. Depending on the circumstances contact follows to a sufferer or the family in a way that maintains the dignity of all concerned. These are not learned methods. The people involved are naturally able to engage with someone in difficulty. It is a great skill. Behind them is a network of support leading to mental, physical or financial solutions. For vets who are concerned about themselves, a colleague or a client, useful help is at hand.

Some anxieties are worse in the thought than the deed. At morning milking one cow was spotted with an unusual foot lesion. The farmer was concerned and discussed his observations with his vet who reported their suspicions to the ministry. Further examination found that another cow was slobbering and on inspection of the mouth, a part of the tongue came away. The farmer knew what he had. The children did not go to school. Not an easy decision because the farmer and his wife didn't want their children to be kept away from home for an unknown period but they equally didn't want them to have to share their distress and emotion.

The farmer spent some time on the 'phone to his neighbours and then met the two ministry men at the gate. Neither had ever seen Foot & Mouth disease. 'You will now' said the farmer. One of the ministry men is an administrator who had never seen an animal slaughtered and he was dreading having to engage his new hands on role. Two days of experience later he said the procedure of sedation before shooting was bearable and for the cattle 'almost peaceful'. Another veteran of the campaign.

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