

Selling Miss March

The hot local news is the success of a new farm venture. It is not certain whether this came about as a result of fashionable diversification plans sponsored by rural development programmes, but it is certainly fashionable. Another aspect to the rural view. The politicians have urged farmers to 'give the customer what they want' but they may not have been thinking of this option.

Back in the dim dark days of low esteem, before the onset of the national disease, a few enterprising clothes shedding ruralists cheered themselves up by revealing all for the camera. Well not quite all. Strategically placed bunches of carrots, a chicken, a tow hook and a swede were considered acceptable covering with just a hint of forbidden flesh. Behind the scenes Mr April lined up with Miss March and they have diversified into calendar production. The Womens Institute have now done 'it'. Also the farriers. We await the nude large animal veterinary calendar with eager anticipation.

The idea is perhaps not quite so off the wall as it first appears. The Devon FMD inquiry gets under way next week and the question was asked by one of the organisers 'should vets attend the animal welfare day?' For those in practice and their clients the answer is obvious but for people outside that cosy club the question is very real.

FMD is seen by many as an environmental problem. The chairman of the inquiry is an environmentalist. Input is invited via press and web from interested parties. All the environmental type organisations are expected to have put in written 'evidence' and the weight of these presentations will determine how the five days of the verbal inquiry will be structured. A large environmental input equals a large allocation of formal presentation. There isn't a veterinary day planned apparently. The farming organisations and various agencies will have their say. As of yesterday two individual vets have agreed to be involved but it is hoped that there will be others. It seems that without formal invitations few vets will promote themselves into the spotlight.

Does it matter whether local vets have an input? They certainly have strong views and they certainly have direct experience of the disease and of its consequences. It is clear that vets do not like the notion that they are servants of the government with no management role. Maybe a local county event is too small for national bodies to become involved. When the reports are written and studied and when the publicity is generated to justify the expense it may be too late to present the veterinary view.

Of particular interest is the declared intention that the inquiry will be looking to make proposals for future activities. One of the future activities has already been identified as improved herd and flock health programmes with ongoing disease monitoring. Disease prevention, disease recording, even perhaps disease tracking or full traceability. The role of the ham sandwich was highlighted in the piggy problems last year. Did the local vet assist in identifying this source? The role of waste airline food has still not been clarified in the current disease scenario. Future knowledge is expected to come from the hands on people not as a table top exercise.

If the future means better local and national disease awareness and prevention these should be seen as part of the veterinary environment. The activities for disease control can be expected to be more open and less of a cosy arrangement between client and veterinary practice. The many inquiries can be expected to call for greater control of activities that can put other animals and businesses at risk. Biosecurity should be a veterinary topic but the open ground needs to be claimed now.

Many veterinary organisations are doing a great deal to present credible ways forward for an industry under threat from without and within. Maybe these should be presented for public consumption. Maybe that is already intended. Maybe the time isn't quite right. Maybe the stakeholders do not all agree with the principles or the detail. Maybe now is the opportunity to claim public support, ahead of the inquiries, for veterinary directed animal, client and environmental welfare.

The calendar would present a different face of veterinary awareness. It is unlikely to be written into their role specifications, but the presidents of the various associations could present a united front for all to see. Companies would vie to provide suitable products and apparatus for Mr October and a face mask would be essential for Mr June.

Is it expected that livestock farming and veterinary involvement will fall back into its original rhythm once the country is FMD free? If not then now appears to be the time to assemble the wherewithal if 2002 is to kick start greater awareness of the role of the veterinary surgeon in the UK of tomorrow.

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