

## Speaking the written word

For the first time in many, many months I have followed a herd of cows along the road. The traffic stopped, not so much in courtesy but more in amazement. If it had been at the weekend, rather than early on a weekday morning, mothers would have directed their children to view this rare occurrence. The herd travelled for about one hundred yards, followed by a one eyed man with a knapsack sprayer. None of the cows were seen to foul the roadway but both sides of the road were sprayed before the traffic passed through.

Knowledgeable souls might have commented ‘there goes a farmer with a SOL’. If we were in an eastern european country this would have been said with a smirk, as though implying that the farmer knew someone in high places. It is encouraging to actually witness that Single Occupancy Licences are being received.

The relationship between advisors, including veterinary surgeons, and farmers has long been a verbal one. ‘Ask the vet’ really means ask him to explain what we have to do. The SOL guidance notes for owners/keepers is a tightly printed document of over nine A4 pages with some rather indistinct diagrams relating to overlapping 20k circles, licensing arrangements between free and at risk counties and permitted movements between A1, A2, A3, A4 and B.

The old story about the king and the knowledge of the kingdom seems to apply here. The king instructed his advisors to write down the knowledge of the kingdom and they returned with five volumes. ‘No’ said the king ‘this is too much for my people to have to study, go away and try again’. So the advisors returned with five books only to be again rebuffed so they returned with five pages, again to be sent away. Finally the king was presented with five words and he was satisfied. ‘This’ he said ‘will be understood by everyone, scholar and layman alike’. On the paper was written ‘there are no free lunches’.

So, how are veterinary surgeons interpreting SOL for their king, a client? How long is it taking to gather and submit the necessary information? For those who are finding this a straightforward and simple undertaking they may wish to share their skill with those colleagues who are oppressed by the paperwork. Three weeks appears to be the current turnaround time, although seven days is the expectation when the operation is ‘running smoothly’ to quote the handout.

As time goes by everyone becomes familiar with complex rules and regulations and breaks them down to the essentials, but time is rather a luxury with FMD. Who is responsible for producing the original script? Does anyone talk it through with the intended recipients? Are veterinary surgeons in high, or low, places asked to have an input? Maybe the profession should engage a tabloid type headline writer to draw out the essentials.

Some farmers have expressed the view that it is the vets who are ‘doing alright’ out of foot and mouth. It would undoubtedly come as a surprise to them to have revealed that one of the most technically competent local practices is losing money. But, maybe this is an aspect that should be more openly discussed. Obviously there are conflicting aspects here in that a

business would not normally be best advised to notify its customers that it is experiencing difficulties. Is the veterinary practice seen as sharing the problems experienced by the farmer, or aloof from the real difficulties and just reaping in the cream from farming without being at risk?

The local business group is holding a conference to discuss future business developments including recovery from FMD. No veterinary surgeons have joined the association and it is unlikely that any will be attending the conference. Other businesses will be highlighting the difficulties experienced due to working in a blighted county. These difficulties include lack of contact with suppliers and customers. People simply withdrew, as though following a family bereavement or divorce. This is in addition to the obvious effects on tourism and the closure of the moors and public footpaths.

It may be that some innovative solutions will be forthcoming at the conference. There is clearly a need to reassure and to promote. Hopefully all the sheep testing will move the county out of the high risk status and bypass the at risk into being FMD free. When this happens all businesses will have something positive to say about their working environment, as well as promoting their business standards and availability of products and services. With Christmas coming up the seasonal card may have added importance and a 'New Year - new start' promotion is likely to be essential.

Whether direct and personal promotional approaches will be adopted by practices remains to be seen, but if ever there was a time when outward commitment to clients was needed, this appears to be it.

Richard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or E mail [rgard@agmed.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:rgard@agmed.freeserve.co.uk) or view [www.agmed.org.uk](http://www.agmed.org.uk).

Richard Gard  
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