

The right image

It's competition time again. The news, that an image consultancy is to produce a new look for the new ministry, has produced some rather sour comments within the agricultural sector. Senior figures have objected to the expenditure 'when so many farmers are suffering financially'. This is a pity because here lies a real opportunity to build a fresh approach and leave behind the cumbersome baggage of previous difficulties.

The thoughts of veterinary surgeons are paramount. Who else is influenced by the environment, consumes food, lives rurally and has affairs? A technical approach is clearly needed to get the message across. A full understanding of all the issues is required to place everything into context. One response, to the recent bad publicity on cloning, tickled the right spot with a cartoon of St Peter holding a report and saying to God, 'the committee has decided that it was unethical for you to have made man in your own image'. Good, accurate and technical. You could help the consultants by putting down your ideas based on experience. One offering is perhaps more of a mantra to be splattered across all documents. Develop, Engage, Fulfil, Restore, Appreciate.

Anyone who has dealt with family farms will appreciate the role of women. They are often the unrecognised rural facilitators. The overheard discussions about finance, disease and forward planning are quietly assessed and the feminine role can be judge and jury on who to trust. It is of some concern therefore that the ladies are leaving the farming enterprises to seek alternative incomes. Members of the Womens Farming Union surveyed themselves in 1999 and found that one in ten worked away from the farm. The revised figure is now one in three. This slide into other occupations may make it easier to introduce diversification and expand the personal contacts and social intercourse. A lack of farming ladies will not make it any easier to develop herd health programmes, maintain biosecurity and build practice client bonding.

It is easier said than done to keep vehicles clean and disease free. The notion, that vehicles will forever be washed and disinfected before and after collection of animals being taken from farm to farm, is under considerable strain. It's fine in a yard with a power hose but this requires water and power which is not always available. Trying to shift cow muck from a sheep trailer with a bucket, a trough of water and a broom is difficult. Taking a step back, are the vehicles designed with easy cleaning in mind? The ridges and hinges and gate fastenings appear to perform splendidly as crap traps. It is a requirement to transport directly from farm to farm. It might be easier to say, transport with clean vehicle to a location with cleaning facilities.

Anxieties are being raised with the restocking disease risks. As restocking is likely to take place with animals from different sources, over a period of time, the risks of introducing disease are thought to be high. Highly knowledgeable technical sources advise that 'it must always be assumed that, however reliable the source of purchase, the incoming sheep are infected with sheep scab and lice, are carrying resistant internal parasitic worms and are carrying the footrot bacteria on their feet'. Can this be true? Furthermore the advice is to

isolate the incomers from resident beasts for twenty one days so that the sheep can be observed and treated for common diseases.

Are sheep, from reliable sources, really this riddled with disease? What is a reliable source and how much worse are the unreliable sources? Several months ago it was highlighted that we should not develop a generation post FMD that are afraid to touch farm animals. It should be quite acceptable for children to have calves and lambs lick their fingers and for people to be approached by stock. Yes, there are zoonoses but the risk of infection has to be balanced with the 'environmental' damage from loss of human-farm animal contact. It seems necessary to define a healthy flock. No disease, some disease or riddled with disease. Are we really at risk from transporting in fresh disease onto a farm and is it likely that these diseases will spread from farm to farm until the only reliable source is a diseased source?

How are each of these diseases spread? What biosecurity is required? Are mites controlled by disinfectants? Are diseases of concern spread on the wind or only by animal to animal, or animal to human to animal, or animal to vehicle to animal, contact? Should there be a perimeter biosecurity zone so that no fraternisation between beasts is allowed and should this zone be field to field, farm to farm or even county and regionally managed? For those who believe the management of farm animals will simply return to the practices before FMD, there are others who consider that now is the time to identify and control 'national' diseases that detract from animal welfare and performance.

In parallel with the image consultants impact for government lies a need to accurately assess the realities. A veterinary reality is that animal disease is important. Reducing animal disease is essential.

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