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Why do vets need a practice manager?

Clare Wright

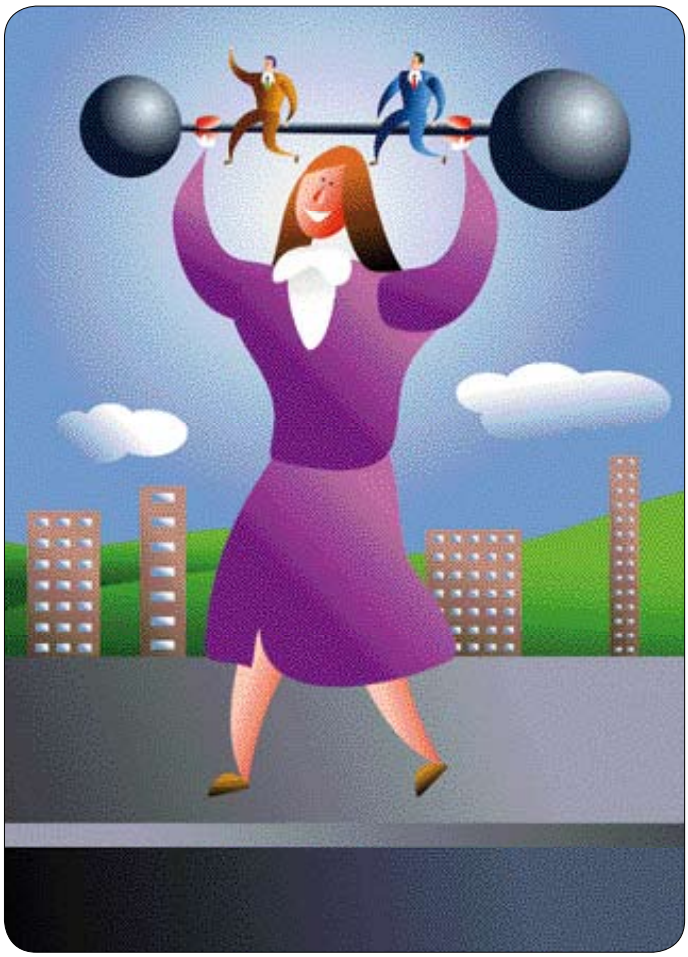
My partner and I never realised just how much we needed a practice manager until we had employed one for a few months. Within a short time she had saved us a great deal of money and an even more valuable commodity - our time. Over the past few years the practice has run far more efficiently and has benefited in so many ways that we will always employ a practice manager and would strongly recommend that others do the same.

A good practice manager can make a huge difference to the life of a practice owner and the success of a practice. Veterinary surgeons usually become managers of their own practice by default, not by choice, and are sometimes ill suited to the position. They usually have no formal management training and learn by their mistakes which can sometimes be costly, both financially and also in terms of quality of life for the owner and everyone employed by the practice. We try to be veterinary surgeon, practice leader and practice manager with all the demands and time constraints of each commitment. Each of these roles calls for different skills and personalities, some of which conflict with each other.

Often the practice owner has neither the time nor the inclination to undertake management training and would be happier pursuing his or her vocation and leading the practice. The appointment of a practice manager will lift much of the weight of day-to-day management from the shoulders of the practice owner allowing them to concentrate on the important decisions for the practice without being bogged down in time consuming trivia.

The job description will be individual to each practice and will include hundreds of items of varying importance such as pay roll, responsibility for building maintenance, nurses reviews, recruitment, financial reports and marketing to name but a few. The more the owner is prepared to delegate to a trusted practice manager, the more the practice gains both in efficiency and in quality of life for the practice principals. The manager will take care of the minor irritations such as phoning suppliers and handling correspondence, but a qualified practice manager can achieve far more given the opportunity.

Regular monitoring of practice expenses such as utilities, phones, rents and rates mean that we obtain the best deal for the practice. Keeping up-to-date with the ever increasing amount of legislation affecting the practice ensures that the practice complies fully with employment law. The practice manager can also address major projects which the working principal has no time to do, such as upgrading a computer system. They can present the research and costing with comprehensive information on all possible problems and variations, leaving the principal free to make the final decisions. Project management such as building maintenance and larger projects require detailed supervision and, if controlled well, will save the practice a lot of money and inconvenience. It takes a huge amount of time to plan, phone builders, painters etc. and liaise with staff to ensure that the inevitable inconvenience is reduced to a minimum.



Recruiting staff can be an arduous task when a principal attempts to juggle it with a demanding full time job as a vet. There will be inevitable delays in assessing and interviewing applicants and progressing through to successful appointment. We have all suffered from the results of 'employ in haste, repent at leisure.' The practice manager can compile and submit the advert, assess applications, arrange interviews and check references before involving the practice owner to make a final decision if desired.

A practice manager will often have a refreshingly different outlook on the practice. They often identify more closely with the needs and desires of the clients, especially if they are pet owners themselves. They provide a valuable interface between the client and the practice owner and can protect the personal relationship between vet and client being damaged by minor, easily resolvable complaints about fees.

Good communication is vital in a well run, happy practice. It is essential that all staff are prepared for change of any sort, especially if they are going to be inconvenienced. Unexpected events upset staff and cause resentment but few owners have the time to let each and every employee know about a forthcoming event such as a

new member of staff arriving or decorators coming in. The practice manager will make sure everyone knows what is going on and will also communicate good news important to the workforce including good customer feedback and important life events such as significant birthdays and births. This attention to detail promotes good team spirit and a pleasant atmosphere are both well documented in increasing job satisfaction.

The practice manager is also a very valuable mediator. They provide an approachable interface between the workforce and the practice owner. However much we pride ourselves on being amenable and accessible, it is much easier for a member of staff to raise an issue of concern in an informal way with the practice manager, without it appearing a formal complaint. Minor differences can often be ironed out at this stage and will not progress and cause ill feeling. It is all too easy for an owner of a practice to take any criticism personally whereas the practice manager can present both sides of the story, and explain the constraints that may exist, thus defusing a potentially difficult situation.

If a practice manager's multifaceted expertise and enthusiasm are properly valued and utilised they will be of limitless benefit to a veterinary practice. The profession needs qualified practice managers and should support and treasure these vital members of our practices. It is to be hoped that more practices will support their training and development so that veterinary practice and managers alike can benefit.

Clare Wright qualified from Glasgow University in 1978 and spent the first six years after qualifying in mixed practice in Yorkshire. In 1984 she moved to small animal practice in Hebden Bridge and, since becoming a partner in 1986, has seen the practice expand to the current five branch practice it is today. Clare has also been recently elected to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Council.

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News in brief

Hogan's army succeed in charity golf classic

Frank Hogan led his team to victory at the 2005 Tommie Moran Memorial Golf Classic. Frank (far left) and his team are pictured with Tommie's daughter Ruth and Edmond Wall (C & M Vetlink plc). The popular event was held in late August at Adare Manor and the funds raised went to the Medical Oncology Research Unit at St. Vincent's Hospital, Dublin.

Irish appointment at Royal Canin

Royal Canin have appointed veterinary surgeon John O'Connor as Regional Business Manager for Leinster and Connaught. He will work alongside Olga Gibbs, the company's Sales Manager for Ireland. John, a 2000 UCD graduate, has spent the last six years in small animal practice, both in the UK and Ireland. According to the animal nutritionists, John's appointment "reflects Royal Canin's commitment to building increased understanding of the nutritional benefits of its products."

Commenting on John O'Connor's appointment, Olga Gibbs said: "Veterinary practices in Ireland are increasingly recognising the important role nutrition and diet play in the health and well-being of pets. This is fuelling increased demand for our wide range of specialist veterinary diets. John's experience as a veterinary surgeon will be invaluable to our clients, as well as to the rest of the Irish team. We are delighted to welcome him to Royal Canin."

Liver fluke a "major cause for concern"

According to animal health experts, the effects of liver fluke are being felt more in Ireland than in England, Scotland or Wales. Figures released at the launch of the Fasinex Fluke Forecast for 2006/07 show that liver condemnations in cattle are running at 18% in England and Wales, at 20% in Scotland, but at 30% in Ireland. Professor Eddie Goodall, Fluke Consultant to Novartis Animal Health, commented on the forecast: "These figures are substantially higher than in other countries. They really are unacceptable and should be a major cause of concern not just to producers but to everyone involved in animal health." The number of liver condemnations in Irish dairy cows in Ireland, he said, had reached "an alarmingly high level" of 55% this spring.

Prof Goodall forecast that in 2006/2007, due to the knock-on effect of the disease from year to year, there will again be a very high risk of infection in cattle and sheep. He said that fluke infections can depress liveweight gain in growing cattle by an average of 0.5 kg/week and can reduce calving rate by up to 30% and urged farmers and vets to seek advice on fluke control and take action as soon as possible.

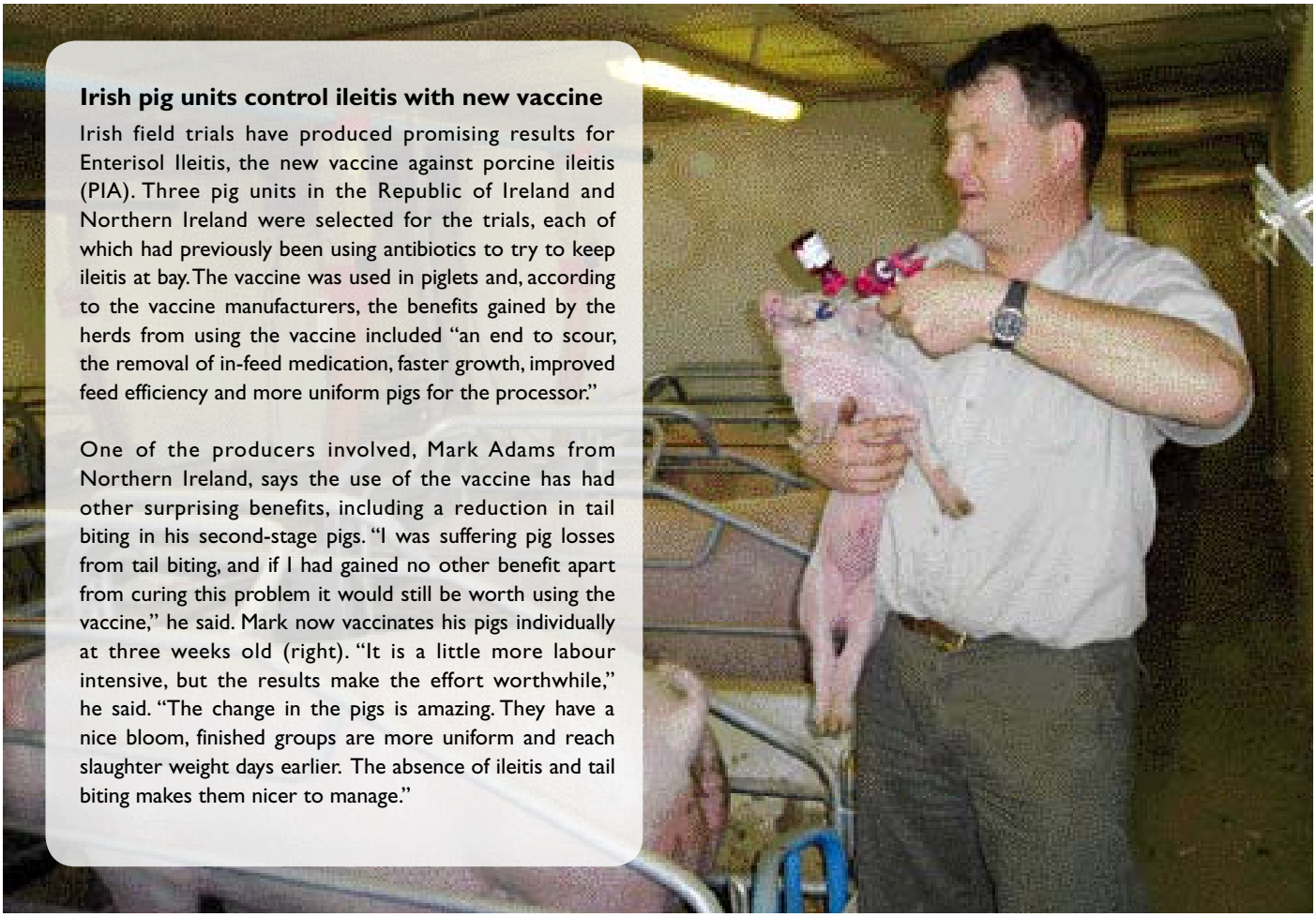
Employers "can't buy employee loyalty"

"Increasing wages simply to keep staff is like the arms race - expensive to play and impossible to win," according to Patricia Callan, Director of the Small Firms Association (SFA). Commenting on an SFA survey which showed that nearly 200,000 Irish workers moved job last year, she said: "Companies must always pay the market rate but other factors are more important in attracting and retaining people in the modern workplace." The SFA carried out 1,000 exit interviews which showed that the main reason for leaving a job was being "unhappy with people." Just under 60,000 quoted this as their main reason for leaving, with the next most popular reasons for leaving categorised as "feeling contribution not recognised' and "lack of advancement." Only 27,000 workers left because they were unhappy with their salary - this came fourth on the list.

According to the SFA, mobility rates among Irish workers are set to increase as economic growth continues. However, Patricia Callan says the key to keeping your workers is not primarily wage-related: "Companies which respond to employee retention solely by increasing wages are only buying time, not loyalty. Companies which compete for scarce talent only on a cash basis are vulnerable to the next offer that the employee receives." She says the survey findings show that "in many instances people leave people, not jobs" and highlighted the importance of good support schemes for employees, investment in training, work variation and autonomy at work as important ways to attract and retain staff.

New formulations for CTC

CTC 10%, a broad spectrum in-feed antibiotic which contains chlortetracycline 10%, is is now available as an oral powder and a premix. The drug is recommended for the treatment of respiratory diseases in young cattle.



Irish pig units control ileitis with new vaccine

Irish field trials have produced promising results for Enterisol Ileitis, the new vaccine against porcine ileitis (PIA). Three pig units in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were selected for the trials, each of which had previously been using antibiotics to try to keep ileitis at bay. The vaccine was used in piglets and, according to the vaccine manufacturers, the benefits gained by the herds from using the vaccine included "an end to scour, the removal of in-feed medication, faster growth, improved feed efficiency and more uniform pigs for the processor."

One of the producers involved, Mark Adams from Northern Ireland, says the use of the vaccine has had other surprising benefits, including a reduction in tail biting in his second-stage pigs. "I was suffering pig losses from tail biting, and if I had gained no other benefit apart from curing this problem it would still be worth using the vaccine," he said. Mark now vaccinates his pigs individually at three weeks old (right). "It is a little more labour intensive, but the results make the effort worthwhile," he said. "The change in the pigs is amazing. They have a nice bloom, finished groups are more uniform and reach slaughter weight days earlier. The absence of ileitis and tail biting makes them nicer to manage."

Dairy cows not wormed enough

A leading veterinary pharmaceutical firm has warned that dairy cows are not being wormed enough. According to Brian Rice, Technical & Marketing Manager with Merial Animal Health, the message is clear - dairy cattle are showing parasite burdens sufficiently large to affect their performance. Previous research, he said, has shown that nine out of ten adult dairy cows carry stomach worms and that this can have a knock-on effect on productivity.

Mr Rice said: "The research demonstrating the existence of stomach worms amongst dairy cows is well established; with more recent trials highlighting in real terms how stomach worms in cows have a real impact on productivity and yield." Citing a study published in 2004, Brian said that wormed cows ate for a significantly longer time, had significantly higher yields of milk solids and had better condition scores at 28 days after treatment, than unwormed cows.

"It is a safe assumption that dairy cows were not widely treated for stomach worms in the past because, in the past, it meant destroying milk," he continued. "However, it is now possible to effectively treat stomach worms and keep milk, which means improved yield and productivity." He pointed out that the Merial wormer Eprinex is an option to treat worms. With the active ingredient eprinomectin, it is the only product licensed in Ireland to treat stomach worms in cattle without a need to discard milk. Mr Rice also emphasised that now, shortly after housing, is a crucial time to worms cows and heifers.

Fish switch for sensitivity diet

Royal Canin have announced a switch in the major source of protein in their popular Sensitivity Control diet. According to the animal nutrionists, "environmental considerations" have prompted them to use blue whiting instead of capelin in formulating the food. Landings of capelin have proved lower than expected in both 2004 and 2005, causing concerns about global stocks of the fish. Stocks of blue whiting, however, are not thought to be at risk. "We take our environmental responsibilities very seriously," commented Gill Furniss, veterinary director of Royal Canin. "It's important that capelin stocks are given proper time to recover and, in the meantime, our research has shown that blue whiting is a very effective replacement."

Royal Canin have also taken the opportunity to change Sensitivity Control diet's carbohydrate source from the root to the upper parts of the cassava plant. This, according to the company, "ensures a consistently higher quality carbohydrate component, as well as improved digestibility."