THE ISSUES OF VETERINARY SURGEON RECRUITMENT into large animal veterinary practice have been aired and real difficulties identified.

Experienced surgeons leave a practice and there are delays before replacements are able to be found. The expectations of young graduates have been shown to differ from the notion of working for years within a practice and then buying into the partnership. Progressive practices have had to change the way they deliver veterinary services and these changes have been specifically noticed, critically, by dairy farmers.

The whole industry recognises that the number of dairy herds continues to fall, but historically the number of cows nationally has stayed about the same. The demands on the farmer to manage larger herd numbers are increasing year on year and they also have issues of staff recruitment.

One farmer has commented that he refuses to deal with one supplies company because its rep made disparaging, and in his view ignorant, remarks about the quality of work and payment expected by his overseas workers.

The farmer has put considerable time and effort into developing the skills and abilities of his staff and he relies on them to carry out highly-technical functions and to ensure high welfare standards.

The notion that overseas workers are cheap labour may have been true when the EU was first expanded, but now those workers are experienced, a backbone to the future of the dairy herd and receive full salary and employment conditions.

The difficulties of providing veterinary services are not a problem that the farmer wants and, increasingly, any fall-off in veterinary support is less well-tolerated. Veterinary practices that encounter service delivery issues have been specifically noticed, critically, by dairy farmers.

Many of the farmers like to enjoy a personal relationship with their dairy vet. An interest in the cows would appear to override issues of bad breath, irritability and an un tidy car.

Economics of scale

But what of economics? A farmer recently commented that he was invited to attend a dairy discussion group and although producing several million litres of milk, he was the smallest milk producer in the region.

The attitudes of the larger milk producers were rather different to his own. He still considers the farm to be a family business, works long hours, knows that changes to the way the farm is managed would be beneficial but has difficulty in handing over full responsibility to others. If there is a difficult calving, he will attend. If a cow is lame, he wants to be informed and will check her progress.

When the health and safety officer arrives unexpectedly, he drops everything and shows him around. If the diesel hasn’t been delivered as ordered, he arranges for a temporary supply. And so on.

Even at 21p per litre, the milk cheque will come to over £2 million for the year. How does that compare to his veterinary practice? When the service contract is negotiated, is he a big beast or a minnow? If he is a minnow, would it benefit him to combine with uncle Jim and cousin Henry to arrange veterinary services, as he does with machinery and buildings?

The services he wants arguably break down into three clear areas:

Problem-solving – of disease and preventing future occurrences. This requires a dairy vet who can call on technical support as required. The means of arriving at a solution may not be understood by the farmer. If the attending vet brings in another vet with specialist knowledge to investigate and advise, this is a strength, not a weakness.

Forward planning – recognising the historical and current health issues and developing clear advice that links into health plans, welfare and the demands of milk purchasers.

Tech services – including buildings management, hygiene, stock purchases, fertility management, hoof-trimming and cow mobility assessment. These activities can be carried out by non-vets.

When a farmer complains about the cost of veterinary support, it is interesting to ask whether the veterinary advice was actually followed. Each farmer believes that his herd requires the advice and that it is necessary to question how the advice was actually followed. Each farmer believes that his herd requires the advice and that it is necessary to question how the advice was actually followed. Each farmer believes that his herd requires the advice and that it is necessary to question how the advice was actually followed. Each farmer believes that his herd requires the advice and that it is necessary to question how the advice was actually followed. Each farmer believes that his herd requires the advice and that it is necessary to question how the advice was actually followed.

Measuring value

This comment arises so frequently that it is necessary to question how the figures mean for disease, growth and well-being is an example of a developing area of potential value.

There are many applications that can assist the farmer and his vet to accurately know why problems arise.

When the veterinary contract is being negotiated, an agreement on what counts as success, failure or acceptable may become more important than the annual call-out costs or the margin on drugs.

The major area that undermines all future hopes and plans is nutrition. There are many sources of advice and consultancy that are wrapped up in product purchasing so that trying to put an economic figure on nutritional planning and advice undermines the ability of a veterinary practice to be financially valued for its input.

However, setting growth and yield standards for a herd and relating these to disease and well-being is very much a veterinary area of expertise.

Is a large dairy herd better off by having a veterinary surgeon as an employee? The farmers who have or are considering this option are responding to the weakness being exhibited by veterinary practices to be bold in offering their services.

It seems unrealistic for a veterinary practice to be able to put forward a dairy vet who will support a large dairy client for the next decade. Many of the farmers like to enjoy a personal relationship with their dairy vet, exchange Christmas cards, attend weddings and the like. It is that aspect that can be expected to change for the dairy herds as the farmer operates a more corporate approach.

Many older vets may find this approach apparently unacceptable, but in discussion with retired cattle vets they comment that pretty soon after retirement their contact with previously “friendly” farmers becomes diluted.

There is an opportunity to promote successful dairy veterinary practice: problems solved, targets achieved, animal observations applied. If the reaction is that the practice is too busy keeping up with the day-to-day work to consider promoting the success of what they do, then farmers are likely to look for alternatives, rather than the potential to engage more and more with a profession that has skills and knowledge to spare.

THE BVA and Pig Veterinary Society (PVS) are reminding pig keepers to avoid swill feeding following the recent announcement from DEFRA that the risk of an incursion of African Swine Fever (ASF) in the UK has risen from “Very Low” to “Low”. The risk level has been raised due to spread of the highly-contagious disease and an increased threat of infection in Eastern Europe. Cases have been reported in the Czech Republic, Romania and Poland as the disease moves south and west. The spread to the Czech Republic is seen to be of particular concern as ASF has “jumped” a country – indicating a new route of infection. Most cases have been in wild boar, but there have been a significant number of cases identified in backyard sites and a small number of commercial herds.

BVA senior vice-president John Fishwick says that “some cases have arisen through animals being fed swill which has been contaminated with infected meat. This means it is more important than ever that all pig keepers avoid feeding food waste of any kind to their animals”.

PVS president Mark White adds: “There is no risk to human health from this disease, but it could have an enormous impact on pigs in this country and would devastate our pig industry. This would have a consequential impact on the cost of pig meat to consumers.”