FEDERATION OF VETERINARIANS OF EUROPE

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FVE POSITION
Prevention is better than cure: regular animal health visits make this happen

Why are regular veterinary visits essential?

In Article 25 of the European Union Animal Health Law, Regulation 2016/429[1], the EU requires operators to make sure that establishments receive animal health visits from a veterinarian. These 'animal health visits' shall be implemented in all EU countries by April 2021 and aim to strengthen animal health by improving disease prevention, in particular biosecurity and detection of disease.

To date, no Act lays down the minimum requirements necessary for the uniform application of Article 25. Without these supporting Acts, the Article is in serious danger of being implemented inconsistently or insufficiently in the Member States.

There are great challenges for livestock farming today: keeping disease out (e.g. ASF, AI), reducing the climate footprint of farming (to make climate-neutral by 2050), reducing the use of antibiotics (by 50% by 2030), to make animal farming more welfare-friendly and sustainable (e.g. closer farming cycles) and more generally, to rebuild trust in farming. Regular veterinary visits have great potential to improve animal welfare and economic efficiency, as well as to reduce use of antibiotics and enhance sustainability. This is shown in countries that already implement regular health visits.

Without these regular visits, some farmed animals only receive veterinary care when they have serious problems[2]. To advise farmers in improving animal health, to improve biosecurity and to carry out preventive work, the veterinarian needs a robust and detailed knowledge about the running conditions at the farm, which can only be achieved by regularly visiting the farm and with further education. Regular visits are also important to build up a relation of trust between the farmer and the veterinarian.

Furthermore, regular visits by the veterinary practitioner can, and should, have a greater scope than the prevention of disease, as is confirmed in Article 25, which states that the visits may be combined with other purposes. Regular veterinary visits which include good quality communication and knowledge transfer between the veterinarian and producers and stockmen are extremely important and can improve animal welfare and

[1] Regulation (EU) 2016/429 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on transmissible animal diseases and amending and repealing certain acts in the area of animal health ('Animal Health Law'): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0429&qid=1602247521175&from=EN

2 A 2018 review by FVE across 24 countries in the EU found an average of only 77.8% of livestock farms are covered by veterinary preventative health farm visits. Pig farms are visited relatively the most: an average of 83,8% of the farms of the countries studied. For cattle, poultry and small ruminant farms, this percentage was respectively 79,4%, 79% and 67,7%. The figure of which farms were covered and how frequently varied greatly between farms, species and countries.

promote responsible use of veterinary medicines. As said by the recently published European Commission study on the future of EU livestock[3] '*Climate, health and animal welfare should be placed at the heart of innovation of the livestock farming sector of tomorrow*'. Veterinarians are crucial in deliver this.

Analysing herd health data, herd performance data and setting up farm specific herd-health plans is the core veterinary mission. Through this farm specific herd health plan the regular visiting veterinarian, leading[4] other allied professions (e.g. feed advisors, hoof trimmers) can advise the farmer to improve animal health, welfare, public health, sustainability and farm profitability. The veterinary practitioner undertaking the regular visits can make use of and contribute to the food chain information (FCI) received from the slaughterhouse, data received from the rendering plant (e.g. pathologies) or dairy industry (e.g. lab tests) and advice from the competent authority (e.g. on emerging notifyable diseases or control measures). A good collaboration including transparent communication between farmer, practising veterinarian, the other allied professionals and the official veterinarian is essential.

In **summary**, there is a need to define the animal health visit to formulate a practical and meaningful tool that has added-value for farmers, veterinarians and consumers alike; a tool that will ultimately act in favour of animal welfare, food safety, public health, reduced production costs, more effective use of resources and reduced climate/environmental impact, consumer perception and consumer reassurance.

A veterinary visit combined with ongoing communication and monitoring between any such visits adds value for all stakeholders by numerous means, namely:

Advising on/improving disease prevention

1. Checking and advising on both internal and external biosecurity protocols
2. Advising on disease prevention (e.g. vaccinations, change in housing, feeding or management). Veterinary professionals have up to date knowledge on vaccinations and can advise on their efficacy and cost-effectiveness for any given situation.
3. Advising on husbandry and management (e.g. climate, feed and water). Appropriate housing can reduce the incidence of disease. For example, appropriate ventilation reduces the risk of respiratory infections, can mitigate heat stress, increase growth, and increase productivity whilst simultaneously improving welfare.

Early detection of disease

1. Notifiable and zoonotic disease status has serious implications for trade. The responsibility of identification, testing and detection lies in the trained hands of the veterinarian. The veterinarian can train the farmer in the recognition of early warning signs and the farmer has the responsibility to inform the veterinarian of signs of infectious disease.
2. Analysing key figures on the farm (e.g. mortality data, production rates, laboratory samples), from the slaughterhouse (e.g. lung, foot pad and liver lesions) and from the dairy industry (Somatic Cell Count, Standard Plate Count,

[3] EC commissioned report: Future of EU livestock: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/04af47b0-0c38-11eb-bc07-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

[4] BVA policy on the vet-led team: https://www.bva.co.uk/media/2787/vet-led-team-policy-position-executive-summary.pdf

Total Coliform Count, etc) to ensure general health protection and early detection of problems. This data should be made accessible to veterinarians and good cooperation with other allied professionals is key.

3. Due to climate change and increased global trade and transport, emerging diseases are found in countries where previously they have been absent. Veterinarians are aware of possible emerging diseases and can detect them early on.

Improved disease management

1. Vets interpret animal health data and perform appropriate sampling to identify the cause of disease and subsequently the appropriate treatment and disease prevention plan.
2. In conjunction with official veterinarians, monitoring disease eradication status (e.g. BVD, Neospora, IBR, Aujeszky)
3. Feeding regional, national and EU big data systems, by clinical animal health reports, thus contributing to syndromic surveillance.

Improved productivity

1. Veterinarians analyse patterns in production data, compare these to targets and then recommend appropriate and cost-effective strategies for improvement. For example, in dairy farming, veterinarians recommend strategies for improvements in fertility to reduce the hidden daily cost of a cow not being in calf.
2. The fast progression of digitalisation and automation in livestock farming provides a huge number of options using key indicators, especially animal-based indicators, for herd health monitoring. Decision making on the basis of herd health indicators is highly relevant for animal health and welfare.

Advising on statutory and societal responsibilities

1. Advising on Identification & Registration (I&R)
2. Veterinarians are educated in complex matters such as how to prevent antimicrobial resistance by adequate aetiological diagnosis and treatment, focused on an identified pathogen and its resistance patterns, sided by early detection, preventing infections measures and providing – where possible - alternative therapies.
3. Advising on sustainable farming practices and how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
4. Advising on maintaining food safety and the prevention of zoonotic diseases (e.g. Salmonella control)

Quality assurance

1. Veterinary professional surviellance in conjunction with the inspections performed by official veterinarians, can contribute to food quality and food safety and strengthen the chain of traceability. Poor traceability harms public trust in the food industry.

Improved animal welfare

1. Improving animal welfare (e.g. advising on measures to reduce tail-biting, increase the possibility of performing normal behaviours, cow comfort, the suitability of housing and enrichment or non-curative surgeries)
2. As science advances, veterinarians update their knowledge and advocate the

best pain-free techniques (e.g. concerning dehorning and castration).

3. Setting up a protocol for emergency care and if necessary, the operator to urgently euthanise an animal on welfare grounds.

Frequency requirements of a veterinary visit

The FVE and its member organisations have identified the following points as important in relation to the frequency and details of animal health visit with relation to points 1 and 2 of article 25 of the Animal Health Law:

- ***The type of establishment***

All commercial operators of animals shall receive obligatory regular animal health visits. Small or backyard producers should have/are strongly recommended to have regular visits and a farmer/vet contract, as disease risk here can be high.
The visit frequency is very much dependant on the type of establishment, the management system, the general health status of the herd/region and animal health and welfare indicators.

- ***The species and categories of kept animals[5] on the establishment***

Visits should enable the detailed assessment of each production cycle and occur at least biannually for continuous production systems. They should be frequent enough for the veterinary surgeon to have personal knowledge of the condition of the animal or current health status of the herd or flock. The number and timing of the visits are crucially important. Visits should mainly be done before high-risk periods, e.g. at the start and the ending of a production cycle. If the frequency is too low, health visits will not be able to achieve the advantages concerning animal health and welfare, performance, food safety, and avoiding economic loss for the farmer.
For more details, see Annex 1.

The number of visits should be **increased**:

- ✓ For farms that have more animals than is possible to assess in a single visit or farms with a large amount of farm movements;
- ✓ When farmers are merging herds or want to move towards a different production system e.g. organic farming
- ✓ Should the disease situation be unfavourable (e.g. outbreaks of notifiable diseases in the region);
- ✓ Should the risk for emerging diseases to which the animals in the establishment are susceptible increase (e.g.outbreaks in neighbouring country);
- ✓ If antibiotic use is higher in the farm than the average country or practice norm for that species;
- ✓ When abnormalities are seen in key farm data (e.g. reduced production data, respiratory problems);
- ✓ Reason to suspect contagious or non-contagious disease (e.g. increased mortality)
- ✓ When abnormalities are seen from the feedback from the slaughterhouse (FCI) (e.g. more abscesses, more lung lesions, more footpad dermatities);
- ✓ When previous inspections show official compliance issues or when important

[5] This document focuses only on livestock. Animals are also commercially kept in other establisments, e.g. animal shelters or zoos, but this is not covered in this document.

advice or recommendations from the herd health plan remain outstanding.

The number of visits can be **decreased** for 'high-health herds' or 'low-risk farms':

- ✓ Depending on the type of production e.g. extensively kept animals
- ✓ Based on the knowledge of the veterinarian in the farm with a yearly updated herd health plan, a documented good disease status and low antibiotic use
- ✓ Based on the veterinarian having access to routine data from the farm.
- ✓ If existing regular health visit programs e.g. by third party assurance schemes already take place

The veterinarian should discuss with the business operator, on the basis of epidemiological reports and close collaboration with the competent authority, the listed and emerging diseases in the area and how to improve biosecurity to keep the diseases out.

- ***The veterinarian should review:***

- ✓ General health and welfare status of the animals. When appropriate to the farming system, this might include post mortem results.
- ✓ Treatment protocols and storage of veterinary medicines and medicated feed including the use of antibiotics.
- ✓ Biosecurity measures including (when applicable for the specific farming system):
  - o quarantine measures;
  - o efficacy of the entry system for visitors/workers;
  - o use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);
  - o use of disinfectants (where, when, which);
  - o access of vehicles on farms (including disinfection);
  - o pest control;
  - o restrictions for pet animals (e.g. preventing entry into stables);
  - o purchase of animals, litter and feed;
  - o disposal of carcasses and litter;
  - o internal farm biosecurity (e.g. control of water supply);
  - o registration of visitors on farm.
- ✓ Preventive measures including vaccination and treatment protocols.
- ✓ Relevant surveillance, or official controls to which the animals and type of establishment are subject.
- ✓ Animal welfare and husbandry issues, especially those that are problematic within the species, for example, pododermatitis in poultry and tail biting in pigs.

The FVE adds further points to support points 1 and 2 of article 25:

- ✓ Fundamental to the success of the visits for the farmer is fundamental for the farmer to have a <u>one-on-one contract</u> with the veterinarian or veterinary practice to perform the regular health visits. This way the veterinarian/veterinary practice can build their knowledge of the farming practice at that farm and can help to prevent disease and reduce the use of antimicrobials through a tailor-made preventive herd health plan for that farm. This veterinarian will also know about the local and national disease.
- ✓ For an animal health visit to be beneficial, it must be connected to a

farm specific herd health plan (see additional reference) and there must be a tangible output. There must be a report of the visit summarising key findings with useful advice and feasible recommendations to the business operator. The report and visits will be used to revise the herd health plan. Even better, as part of the one-to-one contract there will be a provision that data is placed in a database accessible to the farmer and the veterinarian, in compliance with EU GDPR.

- ✓ The responsibility of the veterinary practitioner doing these regular animal health visits is not to carry out official controls but to provide a clinical service for the farmer, to improve biosecurity, prevention, reducing antibiotic treatments, and improving the welfare and sustainability of the farms.
- ✓ The final report summarising the output of the visit could be available on request to public health and the official veterinary services. The report would be informative to any other vet who's services the farmer may need to enroll.
- ✓ Prior animal health visits for animals imported from third countries should also be considered.
- ✓ Some farms may have several species - for example a pig unit, a beef herd and a livery stable for horses – this would involve several specialised veterinarians and herd health plans for the different species.
- ✓ Some farm assurance schemes already introduced veterinary visits to support farmers to reach the required minimum requirements.
- ✓ It is important that the Animal Health Visit serves it's purpose as so far described. In order to do so it should not be unnecessarily time consuming or paperwork heavy.

Veterinary visits add value

Regular veterinary visits add clear financial value to the farmer, as well as consumers and to the greater community. Preventing diseases alongside ongoing assessment of health and welfare outcomes, production and monitoring data is much more cost effective than having to treat and control disease. Some notifiable animal diseases such as FMD, ASF, have an enormous impact, both on the farmers, on trade and even on tourism. Transparently documented regular veterinary visits can help to rebuild trust in livestock farming and move towards more sustainable and environmental-friendly animal production.

Additional references

- UEVP-UEVH paper on herd health visits you can find here: http://uevp.fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010_hhplan_uevh_uevp.pdf
- BPT Guidelines: https://www.tieraerzteverband.de/bpt/berufspolitik/leitlinien/bestandsbetreuung/leitlinien-bestandsbetreuung.php

Annex 1: Appropriate risk-based frequency of regular visits per species and subspecies

Cattle

Dairy cows: minimum every two months

Note: dairy cow visits have to be carried out relatively frequently in order to prevent mastitis and reproductive disorders, and to be advantageous regarding animal health and performance, food safety, and avoiding economic loss for farmers. In the case of seasonal calving, the visits should be in the critical transition period. In the case of continuous calving and larger herds, visits should be more often. Outside the critical periods, visits may be more spaced out.

Calves (including those for slaughter): 4 times per year

Beef: 3 visits per fattening cycle (at the beginning, during, at the end)

Small ruminants

Note: The small ruminant sector is very varied (e.g. huge indoor dairies, city farms, pedigree breeding show stock, fibre, extensive outdoor meat, etc). Distinction needs to be made between intensive production (e.g. dairy goats for milk) and extensive production (hill farming of sheep).

Intensive production of milk and lambs as well as farms where e.g. vaccines are dispensed: at least 4 times per year.

In case of exclusively seasonal lambing 2 visits per year might be sufficient.

Extensive production (e.g. landscape maintenance regardless of farm size, especially if there is no relevant lamb production): at least 2 times per year.

Pig

Breeding sows and piglets: 1 visit per month

Note: In the case of batch systems of 2-wks or 3-wks, a high frequency of visits are necessary to analyse all reproductive phases, such as insemination, farrowing, weaning and gilt management.

Fatteners: 2 visits per fattening cycle or 4 visits per year

Note: This frequency is needed in order to verify two important points in the weaning/fattening cycle:

1) The housing of the animals in the barn. Checks are needed on management of housing and biosecurity including microclimate parameters, stocking density, group management, feed/water delivery, health at arrival, homogeneity of the batch, cleanliness of the buildings etc.
2) Prior to slaughter. A review is required on the growth of the animals, homogeneity of the batch, body condition score (BCS) and muscular development etc.

Poultry

Pullet rearing period: 3-4 visits per rearing period (Rearing period of pullets = from day one up to 17 weeks of age)

Laying hens: 1 visit per every 3 months with higher frequency at start

Note: The period after transfer from the pullet rearing plant to the layer plant is a critical development phase for layers. In this period, the visitation interval

should be increased to e.g. every two weeks; as this phase is important for the development and health of the layers in the whole laying period.
Broilers: 1-2 visits per production cycle (the most important timings are at the start and before going to the slaughterhouse)
Turkeys: 1 visit per month
Note: poultry farms are regularly visited for Salmonella monitoring.

Mink
4 times per year
Note: the visit frequency should be timed in relation to the production cycle, e.g. around the different reproductive stages and slaughter.

Rabbit
4 times per year

Fish

Fish for food production: between 1 visit/month – 2 times/yearly (depending species, farm type, disease occurrence, etc)

Units producing smolt: 1 visit/month

Molluscs, crustaceans or echinoderms: at least 2 times per year

Note I: Directive 2006/88 Annex III B attached includes a table on the frequency of veterinary visit based on the risk analysis, the farmed species and the health category. (PART B Recommended surveillance and inspections on farms and mollusc-farming areas)

Note II: some countries have set frequencies of visits already, which are usually combined with disease sampling and other evaluations e.g. use of veterinary medicines. In Belgium, salmonids visits are 1 - 3 times per year (with sampling for VHS and IHN) following the risk assessment by the AFSCA (agency for the food safety). In Norway visits vary for different type and size of farms.

Note III: Over 30 aquatic animals are farmed in Europe. They have completely different farming conditions and production rates. As such it is extremely difficult to set just one appropriate frequency. It depends on risk analysis, species reared, type of surveillance, farm size, etc.

Note IV: temperature and environmental factors play an important role in aquaculture, if substantial changes occur in temperature or environmental parameters, visits should be more often.

Horses

1-2 stable visits/ year depending on the type of place and number of animals

Game

Deer: twice a year
Note: depending on type and production system e.g. farmed deer for venison production, deer wild roaming in summer, park deer, etc.