Quo vadis pig veterinarian? Barriers and incentives for the evolution towards an advisory role

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Pig veterinarians and other actors in the pig health advisory system play a key role in the production of high quality, safe, nutritious and affordable pork for consumers, in the improvement of farms' performance and in the protection of pigs' health and welfare. Experts agree that the role of veterinarian in the overall herd health management should evolve from a 'fire brigade' role towards an advising service, which could lead to improvements in animal health. Yet, evidence about how veterinarians and farmers interact with respect to health management shows that this change is still far from being met.

The aim of our study is to propose improvements to the overall pig health advisory system. Our integrative approach consists of three parts. First, qualitative open interviews were conducted with key informants of the Flemish pig sector (n=10), to set the scene and to identify the actors involved. Second, we did qualitative interviews with members of all identified actor groups to investigate practices, attitudes and barriers that impede changes to the health advisory system. Third, we performed focus groups to identify incentives for the desired changes to the health advisory system. The preliminary results confirm the problem statement. Pig veterinarians' main activities in order of time spent and importance for their income, are (i) sale and distribution of medicines, (ii) governmental official work, (iii) attend to emergencies after farmer's request, (iv) give health advice. Veterinarians employed by feed mills or pharmaceutical companies, give 'free' advice which is indirectly paid for by selling feed and drugs. Some of the main identified barriers were (i) current business models relying heavily on the sale of medicines; (ii) the level of competition in both the independent and tied veterinary sector; (iii) reluctance of farmers to pay health professionals for advice; and (iv) lack of a Flemish representative union of the veterinary profession's interests.