

# Vets need to deliver the 'truth' on farming

By Josh Loeb

VETS can play a crucial role in helping moderate virulent disagreements between animal rights activists and farmers, speakers at a pan-European conference have suggested.

They says vets – with their experiences of seeing modern farming practices up-close – are well placed to deliver the 'truth' about politicised subjects.

Jan Venneman, director of the European Forum of Farm Animal Breeders, believes farm vets, with their more nuanced views about farm animal welfare, could be useful in countering negative views about livestock farming.

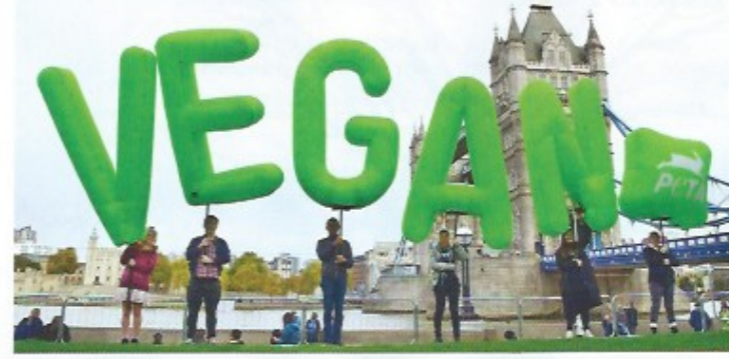
During his speech at the Animal Health Europe conference in Brussels last week, Venneman claimed young city dwellers were increasingly being 'brainwashed' into believing that all livestock farming was fundamentally cruel and should be abolished.

He reeled of a list of ills that some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) suggest originate from livestock farming, such as the rise in antimicrobial resistance among people and the destruction of wildlife habitats.

He said livestock farming was 'very much criticised currently', adding that vegan groups were regularly branding farmers 'cruel' and were claiming that animal products were intrinsically harmful to human health.

'According to NGOs the solution is quite simple,' he said. 'They simply say we should eat less animal products, there should be less animals in Europe and the animals we do keep should be kept in a more extensive way.'

He added: 'The NGOs sometimes have a point. We can't deny that, but criticism of the sector is often very one-sided, and the way it is done is a kind of brainwashing. If you hear the message all the time in the same way then you start to believe it,



especially the younger generation.

'The young generation that is going to school is very sensitive to this message, and we have to be aware of the consequences of this. The number of vegetarians is growing. The number of vegans is growing. It's growing slowly and steadily, but it's growing. Do we think we don't have a problem?'

Speaking to *Vet Record* after the event, Venneman said all stakeholders in the livestock sector should 'join forces and initiate communication' with the public in a bid to detoxify the debate.

'I think most vets working with farm animals won't say the animals are treated cruelly,' he added. 'Of course, everything can be done better, and one farmer might be better than another, but in general the animals are not treated cruelly.'

'I was born on a farm, and I can tell you that the welfare is much, much better than it was 50 years ago'.

Earlier this year several UK media outlets reported that some activist vegans had begun targeting British farmers with death threats. Dairy farmers have reportedly been branded 'murderers' and compared to slave traders in threatening messages sent using social media.

Jude Capper, a livestock sustainability consultant, told *Vet Record* that vets could have a 'really positive role in turning the tide' in a debate that too often featured highly

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emotive 'black and-white' rhetoric.

'Despite the disdain for farmers and others within agriculture, activists do seem to have some respect for vets both in terms of knowledge and expertise and as a profession that cares for animals,' Capper said.

Tony Simon, director of European scientific affairs at Zoetis, said vets who engaged animal rights activists in debate and challenged some of their assertions online were 'brave' to do so.

He added: 'I think the challenge is, how many livestock vets do you have in the UK? If you're a purely companion animal vet, are you going to stand up and be counted? Are you even going to think you're a credible messenger?'

Tomas Norton from KU Leuven university in Belgium told the conference he had noticed public resistance to the emergence of innovative new farming tools involving artificial intelligence designed to detect respiratory disease among pigs and prevent lameness in cows.

'The animal rights activists are doing a very good job of convincing society of the other side. I think we need to come back and show agriculture, even intensified systems, in a positive light,' he said, later adding that vets could be a 'fantastic conduit' between farmers and the general public.