Integrating recording systems for the benefit of animal health

The importance of improving animal health and welfare

The development of effective systems for improving the health and welfare of animals is a high priority throughout Europe and world-wide. Whilst primarily driven by concerns over public health and food safety, it is also a reflection of the high economic cost and levels of animal suffering that many disease outbreaks can cause.

In 2007, the European Commission launched the Animal Health Strategy for the European Union (2007-2013). The strategy has four main goals:

1) To ensure a high level of public health and food safety by minimising the incidence of biological and chemical risk to humans,
2) To promote animal health by preventing/reducing the incidence of animal diseases, and in this way support farming and the rural economy,
3) To improve economic growth/cohesion/competitiveness assuring free circulation of goods and proportionate animal movements,
4) To promote farming practices and animal welfare which prevent animal health related threats and minimise environmental impacts in support of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.

These goals cover the **full range of diseases** that affect livestock. If these goals are to be achieved, it is clear that it will require good communication and the development of effective long-term collaboration between **all sectors and disciplines** with an interest in the health and welfare of animals. The importance of effective partnerships, building on current systems and the encouragement of new initiatives to meet these four goals are emphasised in the commission's strategy.

The importance of good recording systems

Effective long term prevention, control and management of livestock diseases are likely to require developments in a number of areas, for example: improved **movement control**, **surveillance, epidemiology, diagnosis, vaccines, treatment** and also **breeding**, which will increase the animal's own ability to develop resistance or resilience to various infectious challenges. For most of these areas success depends on the collection of good quality data from challenged populations. In many cases, the same data could have a number of uses, which would provide a range of benefits.

Increased benefits and **reduced overall costs** could therefore be achieved by developing effective local, national or even international recording systems that would provide the data needed for many or all of these different uses.

Assessing the opportunities

Different countries will typically already have a number of regional or national recording systems in place for collecting data related to animal health (e.g. on farm recording, in abattoirs, veterinary laboratories). It may therefore be possible to develop the recording systems needed by simply improving integration and harmonisation between the current systems. Where data needed for different purposes is not currently recorded, it may be possible to achieve this with relatively little adaptation. Using or adapting current recording schemes where possible, could present enormous cost savings compared to developing new systems!

Maintaining stakeholder commitment

A comprehensive recording system will only be a success in the long-term if it has the full commitment of all stakeholders, including livestock and abattoir owners. Making sure that any proposed systems are integrated with any current systems (thus resulting in little additional work), and can provide additional benefits, such as better herds/flock or stock management, will be vital to ensuring the long-terms success. This will be particularly important as the European Commission's vision for cost sharing becomes more of a reality!

This project

Before any decisions can be made on the suitability and options for adapting and integrating current recording systems, an assessment of what is already in place is needed.

This project is focused on developing a good overview of the current status of animal health recording systems for pigs, poultry and cattle within four EU countries, namely Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK. The aim is to help identify opportunities to integrate, develop and to maximise the benefits from regional, national (and possibly international) systems for collecting data on animal health. In developing the overview, we will also be looking to identify some examples of successful and effective recording schemes, current limitations and possible options for further development.

The remit

This study is being conducted as part of the European Animal Disease Genomics Network of Excellence for Animal Health and Food Safety (EADGENE). The main interest is therefore in developing recording systems that can provide data that can be used to improve animal health through breeding. However, we are keen to develop collaborations with groups with other interests since we see the development of good collaborations as being vital for long-term success.