

Chair trains small-scale farmers and uplifts rural communities

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*Dr Rebone Moerane*

The training of small-scale farmers and livestock handlers in primary animal health care not only uplifts and empowers rural communities, but also contributes favourably to ensuring rural development and food security, which are two main focus areas of government. The Afrivet Chair in Primary Animal Health Care (PAHC) in the Department of Production Animal Studies, Faculty of Veterinary Science, offers the PAHC Programme, which equips livestock owners, local veterinary professionals and para-professionals with the knowledge, skills and tools needed to uplift their communities.

According to Dr Rebone Moerane, the current incumbent of the Chair in PAHC, primary animal health care refers to the sound animal health management practices that should be undertaken daily by the livestock owner or handler to ensure that health and production are maintained. PAHC requirements include being able to observe and examine one's own animals for signs of disease; understanding different disease processes and common causes of the diseases that are prevalent in the area; and knowing how to treat animals properly and protect them by using available over-the-counter products and applying relevant prevention strategies.

In 2010 the Faculty partnered with Afrivet Training Services when Afrivet identified the need to train small-scale farmers and rural livestock owners in the basics of PAHC. Since then a number of training manuals have been developed that expand on the initial methodology developed by Afrivet. The training material is focused specifically on veterinarians and veterinary paraprofessionals (especially animal-health technicians and veterinary nurses) in a train-the-trainer concept aimed at the further training of animal welfare officers, farmers, farm workers and animal owners. All training material is made available in the language spoken locally to ensure easy and accurate training of local farmers and livestock handlers. Training is very thorough and includes lengthy engagement with the parties concerned in order to understand the needs of the particular farm. The PAHC Programme offers both theoretical knowledge and

practical experience to ensure sufficient understanding. During follow-up sessions over a six-month period the focus is on areas in need of improvement, for example the prevention or early identification and treatment of clinical disease; on-going disease management through sound handling practices; parasite control and vaccination to prevent losses; nutrition; reproduction; and the marketing of the end product.

Since his appointment to his current position in 2011, Dr Moerane has made significant progress in equipping people with useful knowledge regarding the daily monitoring of animal health. The Chair's objectives is to improve the quality of veterinary extension in Southern Africa, including conducting training of veterinary professionals and para-professionals at both under and post graduate level, developing quality training material, embarking on research related to the training and understanding conditions on-the-ground, and preparing final-year students for their compulsory year of community service as state veterinarians.

The rural areas of Hammanskraal, near the Onderstepoort Campus, and Mnisi in Mpumalanga were chosen because of the Faculty's existing involvement in other community engagement projects in the areas. However, training opportunities are not restricted to these areas and Dr Moerane mentioned training previously undertaken by Afrivet in the area of Ladysmith in KwaZulu-Natal, where initially only a small group of farmers were trained and their production outputs increased considerably. Other farmers in the area saw the impact of the training and joined the PAHC Programme. Over the three years the Chair has been involved there, the production of small-scale farms has increased significantly. According to Dr Moerane even commercial farmers have noticed the benefits offered by the programme and make arrangements for their own livestock workers and farm managers to receive training from the Chair. He expressed the opinion that if a farmer wants optimum results, he needs to equip farm workers with the necessary skills and added: 'A good farmer will always see to the empowerment of his workers.'

A fundamental reason for training local residents is that veterinarians and other animal health professionals generally do not see the animals daily and are often only consulted when an animal's condition is already critical. Dr Moerane explained that since certain diseases can cause irreparable damage, it is important for the farmer or handler who sees the animal every day to be taught how to identify serious conditions in their initial or early stages. If the handler contacts the professional early enough, treatment is likely to be successful.

On-going disease management, such as parasite control, is another important aspect of training. Effective treatment against ticks and worms can lead to improved production. Another key focus area in the Chair's training is the improvement of production and marketing. While there are obviously significant differences between the farming outputs of small-scale and commercial farmers, the Chair argues that if the annual calving rate for small-scale farmers can be improved, the area's production and income will increase. The Chair thus focuses on optimising assets through proper care in order to ensure greater benefit.

The Chair maintains that programmes related to PAHC should be accessible. Community participation is vital as the animal health practitioner is not always available and members of the community should be trained to adequately identify and report diseases. Another key principle that guides training is the development of important skills to empower workers through their ability to use appropriate technology and equipment correctly. Training takes on a multi-sectoral approach and is not limited to animal technicians and animal scientists, but includes the extension officers in the area.

Since the inception of the Chair, final-year students have spent time with farmers in the communities of Hammanskraal and Mnisi, where they work closely with locals and are part of the training process. In line with the development of the Veterinary Science curriculum, from 2016 final-year students will be required to identify a group of farmers who will then be trained by them for one week. Moerane's 21 years of service in government enables him to offer students insight into regulations such as those contained in the Animal Diseases Act 35 of 1984, and to prepare them for their year of compulsory veterinary service on completion of their degree. The Chair also offers excellent opportunities for postgraduate research.

The work of the Chair in PAHC has brought great value to farming communities across South Africa and is also benefitting areas beyond our borders. The Chair has already undertaken training in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia, and farmers in southern Angola have shown interest in the training programme. Together with Afrivet, the Chair is set to improve animal health and farming practices across the continent through the delivery of unique practical veterinary extension and solutions.

- Author Louise de Bruin