

# Pharmacists must not overlook the opportunities on offer in animal health

Human customers account for only 20 per cent of business for a pharmacist in Cumbria; the largest part comes from animal health. **Judy Kirby** reports

Four-legged consumers have a particular appeal for Cumbrian pharmacist, Phil Jobson. Or rather, it is their owners he likes. "I derive greater pleasure advising animal owners than dispensing medicines prescribed by someone else," he says.

Animal health is the biggest part of Mr Jobson's business in the rural communities of Longtown, Brampton, Penrith and Rosehill. At his Longtown premises, human customers account for only 20 per cent of business although the community pharmacy is the hub of the enterprise.

His favourite statistic is that 500,000 visits to UK pharmacies are made daily by people who own pets — or companion animals as they are known professionally — presenting a huge opportunity for pharmacists. "They come in for their own health, but they could also buy animal medicines," says Mr Jobson.

Current Government and EU consultation into veterinary medicine does suggest a potentially bigger role for pharmacists in this market and his vision of an expansion of new business is apt. Reclassification of prescription-only medicines to pharmacy medicines would significantly alter current practice and allow pharmacists to supply more prophylactic drugs.

A possible interpretation by UK authorities to implement the European review of medicines (2001) would be to adopt the Marsh report model (see Panel 1). Both these reports and the Competition Commission investigation of POM prescribing by veterinary surgeons are going through consultative stages. But it all seems to be pointing in the same direction as human medicines — a movement from POM to P.



**Phil Jobson's business supplies "everything the animal owner needs", including protective clothing, medicines and medical equipment**

"We've put our case for reclassification of medicines," says Mr Jobson, who is a member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Veterinary Pharmacists Group, "and if the Veterinary Medicines Directorate [an executive agency of Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs] is convinced that pharmacists can add value then there is a case for an extended pharmacy classification of animal medicines."

Mr Jobson adds that there is a significant body of opinion that would argue for more liberal reclassification of veterinary medicines from POM to PML rather than pharmacy

only. He believes that pharmacy should take up the challenge now by stocking and selling the existing, albeit restricted, range of pet medicines. This way the profession can demonstrate how pharmacy can expand the market, add value and enhance animal care. "Although many of the issues of reclassification will be addressed by DEFRA with particular concern for food producing animals and protection of the consumer, reclassifications are likely to be reflected in the companion animal sector," he says.

## Grasp the opportunities

Only about 1,500 pharmacists are currently active in veterinary pharmacy, although the number taking up this challenge is increasing rapidly in response to legislative changes. Mr Jobson says that there have been lost opportunities in the past and recalls how pharmacists missed out during the 1980s when horse owners could not buy wormers from agricultural merchants. PMLs could only be sold to horse businesses. Horse owners decided they would like to go to their saddlers for wormers because not all pharmacists carried them. "So courses were run for saddlers and they were registered to sell wormers to the public. We are the experts in medicines but we sit in our ivory towers when others want a bit of the action. We must not ignore these opportunities."

## Panel 1: Marsh report (2001) recommendations

The Marsh report suggests three sub-groups for POMs:

- POM (A) — medicines that may only be administered by veterinary surgeons or under their direct supervision (when the vet should be present).
- POM (B) — medicines that may be sold or dispensed by vets to animals under their care after a prior clinical examination of the animal or animals; or sold or dispensed in a pharmacy in response to a written veterinary prescription.
- POM (C) — medicines that may be sold or supplied by vets for administration to animals under their care, or by pharmacists or, providing the purchaser can demonstrate evidence of competence in their use, by registered agricultural merchants. For this group of products a prior clinical examination of the animal(s) is not a requirement, however in cases where no evidence of competence is available the products in this category should only be made available by pharmacists, registered agricultural merchants or other registered outlets against a written prescription from a vet.

A lot of Mr Jobson's business is with Cumbrian dairy and cattle farmers. His father started the agricultural arm to his pharmacy in the 1950s when he realised medicines for humans would not provide him with enough money to retire. But in appealing to his fellow pharmacists to embrace animal health Mr Jobson is thinking more of small pets — the British passion. "All pharmacists, urban or rural, could be involved in companion animal medicine. There's no question about it. They could incorporate a range of pet medicines within their premises and could start trading within two or three weeks. But they wouldn't have all the necessary knowledge at that point, and customers wouldn't come voluntarily."

Mr Jobson is keen to help interested pharmacists take the plunge (see Panel 2) and one member of his staff devotes much time to supporting new veterinary pharmacists. "If they are genuine and sincere we point them in the right direction and hold their hands." The Veterinary Pharmacists Group organises a one-week residential course, which consists of both large animal practice and small pet care, leading to the qualification D Vet Pharm.

"Community pharmacists are busy and the dispensing load is getting intolerable but they also complain that they are losing market share to supermarkets. An animal section introduced into the business may not need to involve the pharmacist too much — staff who have pets and are interested can handle much of the new work."

Mr Jobson's business has 10 SQP (Suitably Qualified Person) staff members. This qualification is issued by the Animal Medicines Training and Regulatory Authority. "There are a lot of agricultural merchants with SQP certificates who are perfectly competent to sell animal medicines," says Mr Jobson "but I believe a greater involvement of pharmacists would enhance standards of health care in the

## Panel 2: How to develop a companion animal section

- Assess your market with a short questionnaire to all customers, asking if they own a pet and where they buy pet medicines. This will establish how many customers would be potential purchasers of animal products.
- Contact local animal groups, offer to give talks and to become involved in sponsorship of local events.
- Discover the competition. Animal owners are seeking a wider choice of suppliers for preventive medicines and looking beyond the vet, pet shop, supermarkets or agricultural merchants.
- Two, four-foot shelf units are sufficient for an urban pharmacy pet section to get started. Rural pharmacies need larger sections. Apart from medicines, dog treats, collars and leads are considered to be "traffic builders".
- Vetchem (Northern) has two start up orders for new veterinary pharmacists. The urban starting order costs about £500 and the rural package costs about £600.
- Join the Veterinary Pharmacists Group. Membership is free. The group is actively promoting more pharmacist involvement in veterinary supply, as is the case elsewhere in Europe. Apply to Liz Griffiths, Royal Pharmaceutical Society, 1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN.
- The more you and the staff know about the subject, the more you will sell. Training courses for pharmacy assistants are being developed through the Animal Medicines and Training Regulatory Authority and the National Pharmaceutical Association. The diploma in veterinary pharmacy (D Vet Pharm) would be a sound foundation (see p326).

UK for both farm and pet animals. An opportunity exists."

He cites the example of a vaccine for *pasteurella pneumonia*, which mainly affects calves made susceptible by winter housing conditions. Only 15 per cent of the national herd is protected. "We try to persuade farmers to get this done. The average cost is £4 a course of vaccine, but losing an animal could cost a farmer between £70 and £250. Antibiotics are just fire brigade measures after it happens so we try to talk prevention to farmers."

During the foot and mouth crisis ("the most challenging year of my life") half of Mr Jobson's customers lost animals. Longtown was at the centre of the epidemic. "We stopped selling medicines altogether and instead sold disinfectant, rat bait, paper suits and equipment to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, as it was then."

Mr Jobson's business has grown over the years and can boast to supply "everything the animal owner needs", which includes protective clothing as well as medicines and medical equipment. Every type of animal, both mammal and aquatic, is catered for and a regular newsletter for customers advises on prevention, pest control and even crop protection.

The new breed of "good lifers" who come up from the south with their ponies and dogs and buy farmland for smallholdings are treated respectfully. "They buy six sheep at the mart and ask us for something for blowfly or scab. We have packs that treat 150 sheep — but we dispense smaller amounts for them."

Mr Jobson does not own an animal himself, although his children have pet rats. "What drives me is business — and animal lovers," he says.