



How can veterinarians be interesting partners for organic dairy farmers? French farmers' point of views



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ABSTRACT

Organic dairy farmers must live up to the organic goal of 'good health' in respect the organic principles and regulation. Veterinarians could be the organic dairy farmers' expected sparring partners in reaching this goal but have found difficulties to establish advisory relationships with them. The objectives of this study are –from organic dairy farmers' points of view- (i) to describe farmers' objectives and strategies regarding herd health, (ii) to describe private veterinarians' roles in farmers' animal health promotion strategies and (iii) to identify farmers' reasons for accepting veterinarians in an advisory role. Fourteen organic dairy farmers were interviewed using qualitative research interviews. Data collection and analysis was performed using a modified approach to Grounded Theory. Organic dairy farmers had animal health management strategies focusing on animal health promotion. Veterinarians had most often solely the role of therapist in farmers' animal health management strategies. Reasons explaining that veterinarians were not able to establish advisory roles were found in the differences between veterinarians and farmers regarding their animal health strategies and solutions to disease problems. Furthermore, veterinarians did not always share farmers' (organic) objectives, values and priorities and this could lead to disagreement on the best choice in animal health management practices. This might be further amplified in situations where there exists a lack of dialogue and mutual interest in other.

1. Introduction

Health is one of the key tenets of organic farming. Public health, animal health or environmental health is defined by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) as: 'the wholeness and integrity of living systems. It is not simply the absence of illness, but the maintenance of physical, mental, social and ecological well-being. Immunity, resilience and regeneration are key characteristics of health. Organic agriculture should 'sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.

Farmers constantly need to develop the herd and the farm to live up to this goal of 'health', and respond to all challenges while respecting the organic principles and standards. In organic agriculture, animal health promotion strategies go beyond targeting specific disease conditions and aim at reaching a state of homeostasis (Vaarst and Alroe, 2012). In conformity to the Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 on organic production, animal health should be promoted mainly through the use of appropriate housing conditions, feeding practices and choice of breeds. The use of conventional veterinary medicine is restricted and the use of alternative medicines is promoted (Council Regulation (EC)

834/2007). Animal health promotion strategies on organic farms are based on long-term and strategic farming decisions promoting a good balance between the animal and its environment, preventing situations of imbalance causing injury or disease. In addition, tactical disease prevention strategies targeting a specific disease based on goal-focused efforts are used (Hovi et al., 2004). LeBlanc et al. (2006) supported this view, affirming that an advisory-oriented role in herd health management requires a holistic farm approach of advisors and farmers. However, despite the objective of enhanced animal health, applying the organic standards does not guarantee less production diseases in organic dairy herds, compared to conventional herds (Barkema et al., 2015).

Private veterinary practitioners (further referred to as veterinarians) can be expected to be the most relevant partners of dairy farmers in developing their herd health promotion strategies. The roles of veterinarians have generally shifted towards being more management related, acting at herd level, advising on disease prevention and even health promoting strategies, where it previously was more about treating individual ill animals (LeBlanc et al., 2006; Ruston et al., 2016). Moreover, veterinarians are considered by some farmers as

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referents on specific topics such as biosecurity or vaccination (Gunn et al., 2008; Richens et al., 2015). However, veterinarians can find it difficult to establish a close collaboration with farmers on herd health and production promotion in general (Duval et al., 2016a; Ruston et al., 2016). Such a collaboration requires amongst other regular farm visits, awareness of farmers' goals, data analysis and a certain level of trust to ultimately obtain an advisory role in farmers' herd health promotion and production strategies (e.g. Green et al., 2012; Mee, 2007). For example, some sheep farmers expressed to be reluctant to work with a veterinarian on herd health management because they did not always trust in veterinarians' knowledge in sheep farming, and the poor economic situation of the sector did not always allow to afford such services (Kaler and Green, 2013). Moreover, dairy farmers and veterinarians did not always have the same expectations of what the role of the veterinarian should be (Hall and Wapenaar, 2012) and veterinarians were not always aware of farmers' goals (Derks et al., 2013).

On organic dairy farms in particular veterinarians seem to struggle to acquire an advisory role. In certain cases even veterinarians that did provide herd health advisory services to dairy farmers in general, have found it difficult to do so on organic dairy farms. Even in situations in which they observed that the animal health situation could benefit from their advice (Duval et al., 2016a). Also, French organic meat sheep farmers did not turn as often to their veterinarians compared to the conventional farmers in case of animal health issues (Cabaret et al., 2011). In Denmark too, veterinarians were mainly involved in disease treatments or diagnostic procedures, such as bacteriological culturing (Vaarst et al., 2003, 2006). Pieper (2014) reported that Canadian veterinarians were involved on organic dairy farms in planned and frequent advisory services in reproductive performances and possibly in herd health. However, few farmers counted on veterinarians to provide them with advice on disease prevention (Pieper, 2014).

No study had as main objective to understand the origin of the limited role of veterinarians on organic dairy farms and the organic dairy farmer-veterinarian relationship, as far as we are aware. Certain studies focusing on organic dairy farmers' animal health strategies in general provide some elements to understand the limited role of veterinarians on these farms. According to organic farmers, veterinarians were not the best qualified health management advisors, because they perceived that veterinarians lack respect for farmers' goals, most importantly being 'organic'. A perceived lack of dialogue and a feeling of inequality by farmers were also reasons not to appreciate fully the collaboration with veterinarians (Vaarst et al., 2007). The apparent focus of veterinarians on treatments rather than having an approach to solve the underlying problem could be another reason (Pieper, 2014).

The organic dairy sector in France is expected to continue to grow in the coming years, continuing the sectors' steady growth since 2006 (CNIEL, 2015). In 2015, 2432 dairy farms were certified organic in France. This number represents about 2% of the total dairy farms in France. In that year, 815 dairy farms were converting to organic production. Organic dairy cows represented 3.4% of the total French dairy cattle population. This growth is expected to be stimulated by the current economic crisis in French agriculture, which also negatively affects conventional dairy farms' financial situations (Anonymous, 2016). We can thus assume that veterinarians will work more frequently with organic dairy farmers in the near future. It is therefore important to understand why French veterinarians have a limited role in organic dairy farmers' animal health promotion strategies. And to identify if there are specific factors related to organic production that explain this situation. To our knowledge, French organic dairy farmers' experiences and views on their working relationship with their veterinarians have not yet been studied. In addition, this study allows us to compare and discuss our results with those of a recent study by Duval et al. (2016a). That study was conducted in the same geographic area and period in time, studying veterinarians' point of view on their role in organic dairy farms. So, the objectives of this paper are – from organic dairy farmers' point of view- (i) to describe farmers' objectives and

strategies regarding herd health, (ii) to describe veterinarians' roles in farmers' animal health promotion strategies and (iii) to identify farmers' reasons for accepting veterinarians in an advisory role.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Selection and recruitment of interviewees

A purposeful sample was chosen, using 4 selection criteria to recruit interviewees. More than half of the French organic dairy cattle population is located in the West of France: in the regions Pays de la Loire, Bretagne and Basse-Normandie (Agence, 2015). Therefore, the first selection criterion was to recruit organic dairy farmers in these regions. Second, farmers had to be in an area in which it was known that paid advisory services in dairy herd health were offered by veterinarians. That information was obtained from a list available to students of the veterinary school in Nantes to choose veterinary practices for their internships. Two other criteria were taken into account in the selection of interviewees, namely herd size and the number of years that the farm had been certified as organic. We hypothesized that herd size could influence the occurrence and types of disease problems, the care offered to animals (e.g. organization of work), and time spent with animals. And that the number of years certified as organic might influence the farmers' experience in the use of alternative medicine. Moreover, it might influence the herd health status, as it might require time to return to a balanced state after conversion. The length of the official conversion period is 24 months. We aimed to recruit interviewees showing a variation on these last two selection criteria.

Contact details, geographic location, the numbers of years that a farm is certified as organic and agricultural productions of the farm (only dairy or also other animal productions) were obtained from an online directory of organic farmers of the French agency for the development and promotion of organic farming (Agence BIO). That information was used to identify farmers meeting our selection criteria. Potential interviewees were then randomly contacted by telephone. After an introduction on the study, details on the farm characteristics were checked to assure the recruitment of a panel of farmers representing a variation on the selection criteria. We did not have any prior contact with these farmers or knowledge on their relationship with their veterinarian. Farmers' reasons to decline participation in the study were: a lack of time or interest. The interviewees did not receive benefits for their participation. A total of fourteen farmers were interviewed. Fourteen interviews were considered sufficient since after twelve interviews saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes emerged from the interviews.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative semi-structured research interviews were conducted in French with all participating farmers on their own farm, using the interview guide presented in Table 1. All interviews were digitally recorded and farmers were assured anonymity. The first author conducted all interviews between July and October 2015. On average the duration of the interview was 57 minutes, and most interviews were preceded by a farm walk led by the farmer.

A qualitative research interview approach was chosen as it aims at understanding the context of the interviewees, and unfolding their experiences and perceptions in their own wordings. The objective is to know how interviewees describe their experiences or reasons for actions in the world as they experience it. Qualitative research interviews aim at showing variation rather than quantification (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

The interviews were structured around different topics by the interviewer, using open questions. However, the interviewees were encouraged to speak and steer, to some extent, the course of the interview. Thus, depending on their personal experiences, particular themes were

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