

Newsletter from Uganda - April 2004

Peter Gray MRCVS worked as a Local Government Veterinary Officer in Western Uganda during 2003 and 2004.

I am now approaching the end of my two-year (VSO) placement working for the local government as a Veterinary Officer in Uganda. At times the months seem to have gone very quickly especially the second half of the first year. However, my first six months here and the six months just gone seemed to have been much longer.

I suppose that is natural as at the beginning everything seems new and exciting, you are meeting new people and getting to know the roads and tracks where people live. Then for the last six months the thoughts are turning to what happens when I leave, how will I cope reintegrating into a Western lifestyle and in particular to busy veterinary practice back home?

I have really established myself within the local community now, most days there is a queue of farmers waiting at my door in the morning - many having ridden bicycles or walked long distances for assistance. I am able to plan my day according to where people are located and how urgent the problem is. My motor biking skills have gone from zero to one hundred per cent. As well as riding every road and track in Kibaale District I have also toured Uganda and Rwanda – all on a 125cc Suzuki!



Advising on rabbit health in Buseena

Much of the work I have been doing has been basic treatment of sick animals. While on farm I try and give advice on basic livestock practices - deworming of young stock, adequate feeding and castration to aid fattening and prevent inbreeding. Farmers all over the world can be slow to pay their vet fees but here in Africa where most people lead a subsistence 'hand-to-mouth' lifestyle it can be months before people have hard cash to settle outstanding treatments. Sometimes it is better to ask for a chicken or vegetables which you know they have and can easily hand over.

Kibaale is fortunate to have a community radio station Kibaale Kagadi Community radio (KKCR). The NGO responsible for the programming and running gives the veterinary department a free 30 minute slot each week. We use this to discuss issues of importance or to advise farmers on routine treatments and disease prevention. With recent outbreaks of foot and mouth disease (FMD) and African Swine Fever we have been able to sensitize farmers on disease control and management as well as enforcing quarantine regulations which in the case of FMD seems to have been successful following a six month restriction on animal movements. I very much enjoy taking a turn on this, often discussing things which I have seen that week. I also describe what farming is like in developed countries which is often beyond most peoples imagination.

I have been doing some work for the Central Government Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAIIF). For Uganda to be declared free of Rinderpest by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) it is necessary to undertake serosurveillance blood sampling of randomly selected parishes in each district of the country. Last year I took the required samples in Kibaale

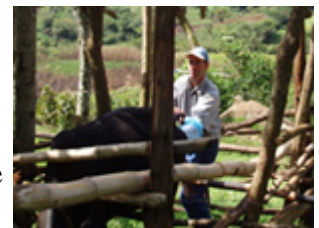
which was a difficult and time consuming process as the random parishes all happened to be in the most remote parts of the district many of which required that I park the motorcycle and continue on foot. A follow up round of new parishes will take place next month. Hopefully in the future the country can be declared free of Rinderpest (and perhaps other diseases to follow) which will greatly help the development of an export market in animals and animal products.

Uganda is a country that relies heavily on donor funding, around 50 per cent of the budget is from donor sources. Unfortunately when you stay in a place for any length of time and get to know people you work out how the Government system is abused. At times you become quite demoralised at the misuse of funding that takes place. In all countries whether developed or not developed there are many forms of corrupt practice but here in Africa/Uganda/Kibaale where the needy poor are missing out on funds given specifically to alleviate their poverty, it seems more unfair. For anyone that has worked in Africa workshops play an integral role in weekly activities. While some are beneficial and teach new ideas and practices most are just an excuse for staff to get together and be paid allowances and expenses. If the same enthusiasm was shown for working in the field then so much more could be achieved.

One of the final activities I will be involved in is the training of community based animal health assistants. It is a scheme that has been tried in a few other African countries despite resistance from some of the professional veterinary bodies. The idea is to train capable school leavers in basic animal husbandry and diagnosis and treatment of the more common problems. They are only trained in those areas where attracting qualified Veterinary personnel has been difficult or impossible (geographically remote, insecure, poor infrastructure etc). For an area like Kibaale it will be a step forward as recruiting vets has been so difficult. The assistants will get their training from the existing Veterinary staff and work under some supervision.

They are given training, a bicycle and a basic start up kit of essential drugs. So much of my placement has been a direct provision of treatment services that the opportunity to do some capacity building in such a way as this is satisfying.

During the past couple of months I have been receiving a lot of thanks from the community for the work I have done. Most people realize that I will be leaving soon and there may not be another VSO volunteer replacing me. I have certainly lifted farmers expectations about what the duty and performance of a vet should be so now they can demand an improved service from whoever happens to work here in future.



Peter Gray