

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED FOR THE LIVESTOCK FARMER

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Economics of Animal-Rearing incl. White, Blue & Pink Revolutions

The twentieth livestock census indicated that India today has a livestock population of approximately 537 million; of this, 95.8% is concentrated in rural areas. Given the fact that most of the country's livestock is in rural and remote areas, access to veterinary services is a major challenge. Livestock farmers are often compelled to travel far from their villages whenever their animals need treatment — a scenario that adversely impacts the longevity and the productivity of their livestock.

To mitigate this problem, the Government has identified a slew of measures within the revised provisions of the Livestock Health and Disease Control (LH&DC) programme; here, a major focus has been on the 'Establishment and Strengthening of Veterinary Services – Mobile Veterinary Units (MVUs)'. Until now, the Government has been providing doorstep services related to artificial insemination and vaccination for livestock. The MVUs will build on the doorstep delivery model, as stationary hospitals cannot be easily accessed by most livestock farmers.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee of the Union Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying has observed that inadequate testing and treatment facilities for veterinary diseases pose a major challenge, especially now where there is a drastic rise in cases of zoonotic diseases. Most villages in the country lack testing facilities, and even when samples are collected, they need to be sent to blocks/districts nearby for test results. So, MVUs can play a major role in plugging the gap in this regard.

Quacks or untrained animal health workers have been popular in rural India as they charge less for consultations and are easily accessible. This has led to the inappropriate administration of antibiotics because of flawed prescriptions especially in cases of mastitis (inflammation of the udder in cattle). So, problems pertaining to antimicrobial resistance occur when the animal no longer responds to a drug to which it was originally responsive. And antimicrobial resistance can be caused because of factors such as high or low dosages, incorrect duration of medication, and overprescription. The World Health Organization (WHO) has listed antibiotic-resistant "priority pathogens" — a catalogue of 12 species/families of bacteria that pose the greatest threat to human health. The MVU model will mitigate the issue of antimicrobial resistance and is in alignment with the 'One Health vision' laid down by the Global Action Plan of WHO.

The M.K. Jain Committee Report has highlighted that livestock farmers face greater challenges in comparison to traditional agricultural farmers especially while accessing credit and livestock insurance. Since a majority of livestock farmers have two to four animals per household, enhancing the longevity and the productivity of their livestock will go a long way towards alleviating rural poverty. Presently, there are an estimated 66,000 veterinary hospitals, polyclinics, dispensaries, aid centres across the country. And the LH&DC scheme seeks to plug the challenges posed by the limitations of stationary hospitals by providing veterinary diagnostic and treatment facilities at a farmer's doorstep for ailments, diseases or any other emergency veterinary conditions by MVUs.

Now, a typical MVU is a four-wheeler van, with working space for one veterinarian, one para-veterinarian and a driver-cum-attendant. It also has space for essentials such as equipment for diagnosis, treatment and minor surgery, other basic requirements for the treatment of animals,

audio-visual aids for awareness creation and GPS tracking of vehicle. The LH&DC scheme envisages one MVU for one lakh animals; however, the number of vans in use could be higher in regions with difficult terrain.

As approximately 70% of India's milk supply is sourced from farmers who own less than five animals, losses due to mastitis alone amount to a milk loss of approximately 10 litres per day per farm (this translates into approximately 300-350 per day). So for most farmers, death of or disease in livestock could mean the difference between sustenance and starvation. The animal health issue is compounded by the growing presence of salesmen of drug distributors in rural communities.

MVUs have been successfully running either on hire or on State ownership basis in several States (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal, etc.) with positive results and increased outreach, especially in geographically difficult terrains. The main thrust for the near future will be on focused upgradation of veterinary health-care services, disease surveillance and training (CVE), and disease reporting in real time.

Additionally, the increasing adoption of MVUs across the country will lead to a surge in employment opportunities for veterinarians and assistants. In the lockdown/s during the novel coronavirus pandemic, we witnessed innovations by start-ups that provided video consultation sessions between livestock farmers and veterinarians, along with apps that provide detailed information to farmers on livestock health and nutrition.

Thus, there is a great deal of scope for innovations and intervention by the private sector in the context of animal health and MVUs. Further, with the growing prevalence of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, the MVU model is poised to generate higher returns on investment.

Atul Chaturvedi is Secretary, Ministry of Animal Husbandry and Dairying. The views expressed are personal

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A new form of 'Gandhian' democratic socialism powered by cooperative economic enterprises is required

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