

Beyond dairy! Large animal vet techs in non-dairy rural animal practice

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The role of large animal veterinary technicians (LAVTs) in rural veterinary clinics has traditionally been centred around supporting veterinarians in dairy cattle work. However, the reality of rural veterinary practice is far more diverse, encompassing sheep, beef, deer, equine and other rural species. With many clinics facing staffing shortages and veterinarians often stretched thin, there is an underutilised opportunity to expand the role of LAVTs to provide vital support across these sectors. By doing so, clinics can improve efficiency, enhance farmer-veterinarian relationships, and ultimately deliver better animal health outcomes.

The evolution of LAVT education in New Zealand

The development of LAVT education in New Zealand has been a progressive response to the growing demand for skilled rural animal technicians. The first qualification was introduced in 2003 as a two-year, Level 4 programme. Over time, qualifications have evolved to meet the increasingly complex demands of rural veterinary practice. In a recent qualification review, the shortages of veterinarians in New Zealand were considered with feedback from industry stakeholders, and NZQA reassessed these pathways once again, leading to the introduction of the New Zealand Certificate in Animal Healthcare Assisting (Rural) Level 4 (RAHCA) and the New Zealand Diploma in Rural Animal Veterinary Technology Level 6 (Dipl.RAVT). Together, these qualifications ensure that LAVTs are comprehensively trained in the practical, technical, and analytical skills necessary to support veterinarians across a broad range of species and services, with the new role of RAHCA bringing support to the LAVTs.

Rural animal healthcare assistants

RAHCAs are particularly valuable in supporting both LAVTs and veterinarians. With training in animal restraint, common laboratory testing, vehicle organisation, and record management, RAHCAs contribute significantly to streamlining clinic operations and returning time back to the veterinarian. They are also equipped to assist with farm logistics, client communication, recording and gathering data, such as stock weights, pasture measurements and tick population monitoring. Clinics seeking to enhance operational efficiency and improve service delivery increasingly rely on RAHCAs as an essential part of their team. The increasing role of the LAVT has created the opportunity for RAHCA to support, therefore helping prevent burn-out of their higher-level peers. Additionally, buddying a RAHCA with a veterinarian for remote calls enhances health and safety by ensuring there is support on hand in case of an emergency. RAHCAs also excel as practical assistants, managing tasks like notetaking, organising supplies, and coordinating follow-ups, making them excellent personal assistants (PAs) in the field, or front of house for the rural part of the practice.

The expanding role of the Dipl.RAVT

The Dipl.RAVT is designed for career LAVTs aiming to become leaders in their field. Contrary to the outdated belief that LAVTs are solely dairy cattle technicians, today's graduates are increasingly involved in sheep, beef, and deer veterinary services, as well as care for lifestyle block clients and their animals.

LAVTs can provide support in surgical preparation, patient restraint, and emergency assistance when required, during surgical procedures conducted on small ruminants, i.e. ram vasectomies. They are invaluable in

organising the clinic laboratory, conducting or overseeing common tests and can conduct lamb post-mortems using McFarlane's modified protocol, the findings of which can be analysed by the veterinarian. Their contributions extend to herd health management, antimicrobial and anthelmintic stewardship, and team 'soft skills', ensuring veterinarians can focus on higher-level clinical decisions and importantly, create more time and space.

Leveraging individual strengths and interests

Just as every veterinarian is an individual, every LAVT brings a unique set of strengths, weaknesses, and preferences to their role. Veterinarians should actively collaborate with LAVTs who have a particular passion for working with specific species. For example, a technician with an interest in deer management can take on key tasks like blood sampling and testing, body condition scoring, organising and booking farmer RVM consultations and reaccreditations for velvet antler management, following up drug returns at the end of the velvet season, data tracking, or assisting with sedation procedures.

Similarly, sheep-focused LAVTs are well-suited for tasks like attending to myiasis cases, conveyor work, hoof trimming, and facial eczema spore (FESp) level monitoring.

Helping farmers to make responsible choices around parasitism management may see your LAVT collecting faecal or blood samples, assisting with trach washes, and with support, LAVTs could learn to take leadership in preparing and maintaining cultures, conducting Baermann extractions, and performing preliminary larval identifications, while working closely with vets and external laboratories for diagnosis and treatment plans. By recognising and utilising these strengths, clinics can maximise their service offerings while enhancing team satisfaction.

Data management and decision-making

LAVTs can play a critical role in data collation and analysis, offering veterinarians valuable insights into herd and flock health. Platforms like InfoVet, MINDA, and FarmIQ allow LAVTs to manage data efficiently, ensuring veterinarians arrive on-farm well-informed. With this approach, veterinarians can spend less time navigating reports and more time engaging in meaningful, data-driven discussions with farmers. Enhanced data management also supports preventative care, facilitating early intervention and improved long-term animal health outcomes. LAVTs can write and maintain clinic standard operating procedures (SOPs), client forms and organise external and internal lab results for the vet to make diagnostic decisions and create treatment plans with.

Promoting responsible medication use

Another significant contribution of LAVTs is their role in antimicrobial and anthelmintic stewardship. Through sample collection, laboratory analysis, and treatment efficacy monitoring, LAVTs provide critical information that helps veterinarians make informed decisions about responsible medication prescription and with client education. By identifying emerging resistance patterns and advising on best-practice treatment plans, LAVTs play a key role in promoting sustainable animal health management.

Beyond clinical support

LAVTs contribute in many areas beyond direct clinical support. Their expertise can be leveraged for telephone triage, ensuring that emergencies are prioritised appropriately, and clients receive timely advice. Lifestyle block owners, in particular, benefit from LAVT-led education sessions on preventative healthcare, biosecurity, and parasite management. Additionally, LAVTs often manage clinic newsletters, social media content, and community outreach, strengthening client relationships and promoting veterinary services.

In academic or research-oriented settings, LAVTs can assist with writing and maintaining research protocols, data collection, ethics approvals, and compliance with animal use policies. This additional support allows veterinarians to focus on scientific inquiry while ensuring accurate and reliable research processes.

A sustainable future for rural veterinary practice

While expanding the use of LAVTs across species will require targeted training and potentially accreditation pathways as these evolve, the potential benefits are significant. A more diversified role for LAVTs will alleviate pressure on veterinarians, improve clinic efficiency, and enhance animal welfare.

Recognising and formalising these expanded roles will strengthen the veterinary workforce and ensure rural communities receive the high-quality care they need.

Providing technicians with the opportunity to take on responsibility and have ownership of areas with training and support will also strengthen the relationship between the vets and LAVTs in your practice, developing both loyalty to the clinic and job satisfaction.

By embracing the full potential of LAVTs, veterinary practices can achieve better outcomes for animals, farmers, and veterinary professionals alike.

