



WHAT IS HEALTH?

**Report on a Colloquium of Farmers – Convened by Whole Health Agriculture
and Homeopathy at Wellie Level**

March 2019

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1. **Introduction**

In March 2019, Whole Health Agriculture (WHAg) and Homeopathy at Wellie Level (HAWL) convened a colloquium of livestock farmers to explore and discuss “what is a healthy farm”?

“Colloquium” means “speaking together” and the participants were from organic and conventional farming, and included users and non-users of homeopathy. Our common ground was an interest in how to identify, implement and develop the processes of health and well-being as a practical, farm management strategy, ie how to farm for **health**.

The colloquium brought together 40 people, most of them running, or working on, commercial farms with livestock.

2. **Objectives**

Our objectives for the day were:

- to identify what farmers mean by the term “health”;
- to explore concepts of health within farming;
- to examine the influences, challenges and obstacles to farmers’ ideas and practices in relation to health;
- and to note what measures they use to evaluate the achievement and maintenance of the process of positive health management.

3. **The Discussion**

The day was divided into plenary group discussions, breakout group discussions and scenario building to explore various concepts and practices pertaining to health on the farm.

Morning Session: Whole Group Brainstorming and Discussion Session facilitated by Chris Aukland, MRCVS.

Farm? Whole? Health? – Do we all mean the same things?

We often use words imprecisely because **we** know what we mean, and we trust that others are on the same wavelength through shared language, similar experiences and similar backgrounds.

So, in an attempt at achieving clarity, Chris Aukland started the day in a plenary session by asking all participants to say what they saw, understood, responded to or felt about terms such as “farm”, “health” and “whole”. To encourage the flow, he posed several questions to the group:

- ! What is a farm?
- ! What is understood by health?
- ! What is a healthy farm?
what elements make up the ‘whole’ of a healthy farm?
- ! What measures are used to assess health on the farm?
- ! What or who influences or challenges ideologies and practices?
(eg industry, vet, self/peer, consumer, environment, local/global issues)

What is a farm?

This was a warm-up question. People mentioned the land, the soil and wildlife, livestock and people and also infrastructure, production, operations and economics as part of the farm.

What is a healthy farm?

People viewed this holistically. There were some specifics such as profit, carbon sequestration, wildlife, nutrient dense food and longevity of livestock, but also more emotive concepts such as abundance, pride and happiness were mentioned.

How do you know your farm is healthy, what measures do you use?

Again, there was a mix of specific concrete measurables such as fewer medicines/ lower vet bills, overall costs reduced, decreased mortality/ greater longevity and increased fertility. A lot of weight was given to other aspects such as wildlife diversity and balance, including more worms and insects, depth of top soil, root depth, water sufficiency and efficiency. Aspects of a healthy farm that are less measureable were considered important, such as resilience and adaptability, happiness and wellbeing for farmers, staff and customers.

What are the challenges and threats to farm health?

It was clear that current global trends such as veganism, climate change, GMOs, pollution are having a big impact. Also mentioned were external influences such as: policy, the economic system, public perception and education, the health industry, supermarkets, fashion/ trends and social media.

What influences your ideologies?

A wide range of influences from the industry press, mainstream press and social media, google, schools and education, science, family and friends were mentioned.

What influences your practices?

People were driven by their personal interests, passions and ambitions, responsibilities/ common good, family and peer pressure. Practices were also influenced by their own observation and experience, and also shaped by market forces. Interestingly, fear, conscience and necessity were mentioned.

AFTERNOON SESSION. *Having explored concepts as a group, the afternoon session was devoted to identifying key factors in health management.*

Key Factors in Whole Farm Health Management

In order to identify what might be the key pivotal features or considerations of positive health management on a farm, we created small breakout groups and asked participants to consider how they would set about converting an intensive, production focussed farm to one which is focussed on whole health management. Each group discussed five themes.

The specific task posed to the groups was: You have inherited a farm that has been run as conventional and intensive. How would you set about achieving whole health in this system? Consider health within the following five themes: Human, Land/soil/plants, Animals/livestock, Economic, Outputs.

We asked participants to consider what key production, management or structural changes they would make; what “healthy inputs”, if any, they might use; what trade-offs between economic output and health and wellbeing they might have to make: or/and how they would avoid or mitigate these trade-offs.

Below is a brief summary of each theme:

Human health and public connection

- Much of each discussion focussed on human health and included the mental well-being of not only the farmer but also the wider community which could be achieved by providing access to the farm through engaging with farm activities or as a space to exercise e.g., green gyms. Farmer wellbeing included seeing the establishment of a healthy, diverse landscape which, for some, must contain cows. Happiness for the farmer, the family and the animals.

- Education and communication were considered important at several levels beginning with the local community (start with the local community and extend beyond if there is scope). Consumers were considered more likely to buy both local and high health status food once a greater connection was established. Healthy communication would be achieved through open days and by offering training days (particularly for those members of the public who wish to engage more actively in farming activities). Education could be then linked with external initiatives such as Jamie Oliver's Food for Life. Further engagement that brought people on farm (thus increasing general interaction) included offering woodland natural burials and pet cemeteries. Interaction with the wider community included engaging with holiday makers and particularly young families and school children, where a positive on-farm experience may encourage a change in consumer behaviour.
- NOTE: one voice considered that public access to the farm should be avoided to reduce any risk to farm health.
- An important method of increasing education and communication was the direct selling of goods either from a farm shop, from a market stall or online. Here, farmers could engage with the public on a more intimate level than with indirect selling and the farm story could be attached to products.
- A further contribution to human health was the care of farm labourers with job stability, decent working conditions, decent salaries, continuous development and allowing for mistakes.

Biodiversity in a healthy landscape

- Diversity in both wildlife and the farmed plant and animal species were considered important healthy outputs as well as allowing some of the farm (1/7 of the 1000 acres) to return to nature/be rewilded thus overall, "creating a system where wildlife can thrive". Farmed species should be of appropriate breeds that suit a low-input – quality-output farming system (and must have cows in it). Animal systems should be closed with each animal living out their full life on farm. The farmed animals should be managed in ways that increase their happiness such as a calf-at-foot dairy and pigs in woodland. Farmed plants should include fruiting trees (and nuts) as well as trees for harvesting wood. Landscape health included soil with improved soil structure (including less compaction) and function as well as an increase in worm population. Also included were more trees in general (woodland and agroforestry) and hedges (avoiding sensitive sites) as well as more flowering plants for pollinators.

Minimising impact on the wider environment and external health

- In this theme, off-farm health was taken to be a part of on-farm health, as part of a collective environmental responsibility. This could be achieved by generally 'avoiding disharmony' where climate change was considered a symptom of mismanagement. Reducing overall pollution, improving water health and increasing carbon sequestration were named as were managing fossil fuel consumption and the ethical sourcing of farm inputs.

Food

- Despite food being an obvious output for a farm, discussion of this was limited. In broad terms, food health was achieved as a natural consequence of healthy soils and healthy practice. 'Healthy growing systems produce healthy food' and 'better health and better welfare results in better product quality'. The nutritional value of food could be increased by reducing environmental damage and the use of pesticides as well as the focus on producing quality over quantity.

Financial health

- Healthy farm finances were considered to be related to healthy outputs and particularly in relation to good interaction with the local community and the wider public. An increase in public interaction would lead to both an increase in understanding and an increase in farm income.
- Additionally, achieving whole health on farm includes accepting limitations such as variation in output and farming within the bounds of nature and alongside natural systems. It also includes being open to new ideas for future outputs.

4. Conclusions

It was clear that the group really did think holistically.

There was consensus that a whole farm system which "farms for health" would result in:

- A positive health and well-being status across all aspects of the farm
- The production of life enhancing food would be a consistent output of such a system

- Enhanced biodiversity, ecosystems and environment protection would be an output
- There would be positive and enriched public engagement characterised by; education and outreach, more access to land and healthy environments which will benefit physical and mental health of individuals, more labour employed with higher wages, local food production, processing and sales would bring resilience into local economies
- A more consistent delivery of public goods such as carbon sequestration, soil conservation, water catchment as flood prevention

Next steps.

WHAg aims to explore further what farmers actually do in order to farm for health.

We have begun a qualitative study with holistic farmers and have developed a quantitative survey which will go to all farmers who have expressed an interest at conferences and those farmers who have done the HAWL course.

Appendix

Key/pivotal points identified

Soil and plants:

- The need for a vision: where are you going, what do you want the farm to look like, what do you want the system to be i.e. mixed, predominately livestock, all livestock, predominately cropping, agro-forestry
- Observe: take time to observe what the land and surrounding nature shows you so that you avoid doing anything that goes against the grain of the landscape, the soil type etc.
- Soil analysis: there was a difference in view about the value of this. Some believe in the merits of a full spectrum of analysis including chemical and biological parameters. Others believed that feel, observation and perhaps (intuition) was enough. Others were between these two positions
- Stop all artificial inputs: there was general agreement on this but differences in view as to whether this should be “cold turkey” or a planned transition
- Use rotations supplemented with cover crops/green manures
- Use livestock: within a rotation and also rotate livestock (e.g. rotational grazing and possibly multi-species)
- Introduce trees: a wide range of options identified (e.g. hedgerows, silvo-pasture, agro-forestry, alley cropping, trees as shelter)
- Floral diversity: e.g. in the form of herbs, wild flowers, cultivated flowers as a crop to enhance plant biodiversity, as a soil conditioner, as feed for overwintering birds, for pollinators, and as an enabler of general wellbeing.
- Consideration of tillage: appropriate to landscape, topography, soil type
- Consideration of landscape scale: i.e. the farm within the landscape and specific environmental management e.g. water catchment and retention

Livestock:

- The need for a vision/overall plan: See above but also retain the ability to adapt to changing circumstances
- Choose species and breed to fit landscape and production system: also, the required production/output profile. It was noted that this does not always mean traditional/heritage breeds
- Operate a closed system: for biosecurity reasons and also as a way of optimising adaptation to the system and its health status
- Low external input system: primarily grass fed in the case of ruminants; possibility of mineral supplementation if necessary
- Primarily outdoor based: with rotational grazing and mixed species grazing where possible
- Appropriate housing and water supply: need to have regular evaluation of housing to ensure fit for purpose and be willing to change if necessary. Poor and inappropriate housing and water supply cited as a common cause of ill-health and dis-ease.
- Use a systematic observation regime: this can be systems like Obsalim but can also be farmer's own practice as long as routine, regular, recorded and done at key times
- In the event of dis-ease review the entire husbandry system
- Constant and recurring themes: reduction of stress on the animals, not pushing production too hard, observation, systematic recording of observations and evaluation.

Human aspects:

- For all in farm family and staff: it is as important to seek positive health and wellbeing as it is for all livestock. They are part of the whole farm organism.
- Plan and implement work/life balance for family, staff, co-workers: actively manage stress, work co-operatively as a team, ensure holidays and time away from work, communicate internally as well as externally

- Be aware of the dangers of isolation and mitigate: relationships with other farmers, with customers (through direct sales), with local community, use farm walks as education outreach but also to build community and support network
- Interaction through social media
- Active relationships with customers: sales, education about food and farming quality outputs as a driver of the business
- One summary statement: “sell everything in the chemical store, plant trees, use homeopathy and give good working conditions to your animals, your family and your staff”

Economics:

More differences of views were expressed in this area than in the others; probably reflecting differing circumstances and experiences.

Some consensus was found on the following points:

- The need for a lower level of production intensity: achieved by e.g. reduction of inputs, reduced stocking rate (compensated by greater longevity of productive livestock)
- The need for greater cost control and higher prices: in order to make up for reduced output. The importance of niche and/or local marketing where possible was highlighted, and where not possible premium prices in volume markets. Limited or no borrowing is important.

There were differences of opinion about the desirability of subsidies. One opinion was that subsidies were “toxic”; another view that as payment for “public goods” they were valid and necessary; a case was made for subsidies during a transition or conversation period.

Different views were also expressed about whether conversion from an intensive production system should be a “go for it” all at once approach, or whether a progressive conversion over time was advisable.

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