



## **VETERINARY IRELAND PRESS RELEASES**

**Position Paper (7 May 2003)**

### **Vital Role for Vets in Meat Inspection Service**

Irish vets play a vital role in providing reassurance to consumers on the health status of our food of animal origin.

Ireland has established its claim in international market places as the "Food Island" and the meat inspection service, provided in large part by private veterinary practitioners, represents a very small cost for producers and processors in their efforts to retain hard won markets in Europe and beyond. The role of Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (TVIs) is essential in the delivery of the service. These are private veterinary practitioners employed on a part-time basis by the Department of Agriculture to undertake certain duties as part of a team of professionals giving credibility to the overall veterinary certification of the meat produced.

The "professional" standing of the meat inspection service is of great significance to the meat industry in maintaining and expanding its markets. The veterinary inspection staff is employed by the state, and act independently in representing the interests of the consumer. The confidence of the consumer in that inspection system is vital to the meat industry success and therefore to agriculture as a whole. This independent, professional veterinary inspection service provides the consumer with the best possible reassurance as to the health status of food of animal origin.

TVI duties benefit both the meat industry and private veterinary practices, many of which could not be sustained without this secondary source of income. In this regard it should be noted however that this system provides important flexibilities for the Department of Agriculture and the meat factories. TVI's are only called on an "as required" basis to suit the factories operating arrangements. The payments made to vets for each factory shift are on a "contractor" basis and no extra payments are made for holidays, redundancy or other matters which "employees" normally receive. This system in turn benefits farmers also and safeguards the national Agri-sector. Some areas of the country would have less than skeleton veterinary services if it weren't for TVI duties.

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The recent Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the United Kingdom was first identified by a vet working on inspection duties in a meat factory – a further demonstration of the critical role the profession plays in such matters. The running down of the UK veterinary service in the years leading up to the outbreak undoubtedly contributed to the extent of the disaster which happened there - and which greatly threatened our own economy also.

A memorandum entitled "TVI Shift Allocations at Meat Plants in 2003", issued from the Department of Agriculture refers to the "very difficult budgetary situation facing the Department in 2003" and says that there will be "reductions in real terms in the regional budgets for which the Veterinary Public Health Inspection Service is responsible". In the case of the budget for fee payments to Temporary Veterinary Inspectors who undertake inspections at slaughtering plants "a reduction of 20% is required in the number of TVI shifts which can be worked relative to 2002". An edict such as this, if implemented as proposed, would clearly cause chaos in the operations of slaughtering plants.

On the financial front it is clear that the cost of TVI's represents only a portion of the total costs of the meat inspection service and is only a fraction of a cent per kilo of dressed carcass weight. It is also clear that any possible savings from these current budgetary moves would pale totally into insignificance when compared with the disastrous economic and health consequences and costs which could follow from a watering down of this vitally important independent assessment, which is there primarily to protect consumers of Irish meat.

The Department has however confirmed that whilst they will be providing a reduced service to the meat industry there will be no reduction in food safety and animal welfare standards and there will be no changes in agreed working practices. Against this background Veterinary Ireland and its members throughout the country will continue to work with the Department of Agriculture and Food to ensure that wherever possible the current economic difficulties are dealt with, but only in ways which do not adversely impact on the protection of the consumers of Irish meat at home and abroad and the health and welfare of animals under their care.