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The role of private veterinary practitioners in organic dairy cattle farms in France

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- Organic dairy farming systems are not always a guarantee for higher level of animal health compared to conventional systems (Barkema et al. 2015) 
- Veterinarians: advisor of choice?
 - Veterinarians are not always considered by organic dairy farmers as pertinent advisors → sometimes excluded from farmers' reflexion on herd health improvements (Vaarst et al. 2003, 2006, 2007)
- Growing organic dairy sector in France: more and more professionals will be confronted with organic farming (CNIEL 2015)
- Need for better understanding of the role of veterinarians in supporting organic dairy farmers in their animal health strategy

1. To describe the roles of French veterinarians in organic dairy farmers' animal health promotion strategies
2. To identify factors specifically related to organic farming which can influence the roles veterinarians have in organic dairy farmers' animal health promotion strategies

***Based on the perceptions of French veterinarians
and organic dairy cattle farmers***

Material and methods

Data collection and analysis

- Qualitative, semi-structured research interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015)
- Modified approach of Grounded Theory for data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014)

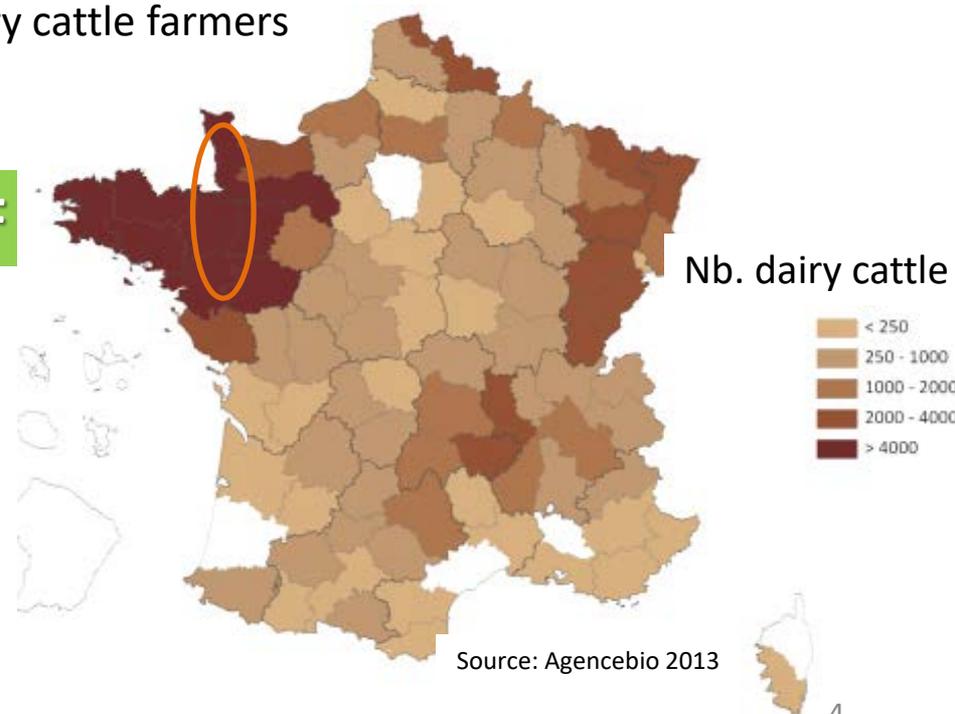
Selection criteria veterinarians **V**

- Working in the geographic area with a relatively high number of organic dairy cattle farms
- At least one organic dairy farmer in their practice
- Offering herd health advisory services to dairy cattle farmers

Selection criteria organic dairy farmers **F**

- From the same geographic area
- Range of interviewees with different herd size and experience as organic farmer

Unmatched selection of interviewees



Results: veterinarians' role on organic dairy farms

Farmers' perception

Perceived role of the veterinarian (n=14)

Role veterinarian on the farm

- Individual disease problems (n=13)
- Diagnosis disease only (n=2)
- Hoof trimming, dehorning calves and fertility check (n=1)

Unfulfilled demand from their veterinarian mainly for support in

- Disease prevention
- Alternative medicine

Some farmers paid other advisors for advice in herd health management

Veterinarians' perception

Advisory services provided to dairy farmers in general (n=13)

Types of advisory service provided to dairy clients	Varied in number of different activities offered
Part of advisory services in the daily work of veterinarians	Varied, from 5% to 100%

Work on organic dairy farms

Percentage of organic dairy farms in practice	Median 3% (Min. 1,7- max. 12%)
Type of intervention veterinarian on organic dairy farms	Most frequent reason: intervention for cases of individual ill animals or isolated severe herd health problems <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 3 veterinarians visited organic farms on a regular basis for the monitoring of reproduction performances▪ For 1 veterinarian monitoring of reproduction was the main reason for visiting organic dairy farms

Range of types of collaborations identified



Veterinarian 5: *'We don't work with them! We never see them! The question of what influences the way we work together doesn't even arise.'*

Veterinarian 11: Alternative 'model' for collaboration

Organic farmers' organization hired 2 veterinarians to provide their members with advice on herd health management

- Objective: disease prevention
- Veterinarians use a farm system approach: young stock, feeding, milking technique, ...
- Farmers pay for the hours spent (at least two visits per year, contact in between)

Focus on health and welfare situations

- **Certain veterinarians were disappointed in animal health situations and farmers' lack of disease prevention activities**
- **Opinion of the veterinarians mainly based on:**
 - animal health and welfare situations
 - not on the values of the organic production as a whole

***Veterinarian 5:** 'Organic agriculture only guarantees a working method, but it does not guarantee the quality of the product. I think that people mix up the two!*

I do not know for the crop part, it is just a bit different, because there are a lot less pesticides and everything, since they have become harmful, I think it is a bit different for the crop part.

But for the animal part, I, I may eat more willingly conventional products than organic, (...) I think that the animals are better [in conventional systems], in my opinion, they are less maltreated! Due to undernutrition, due to the non-use of anthelmintic treatments'

Understanding farmers' animal health approach

Farmers' motivations to convert their farm to organic production:

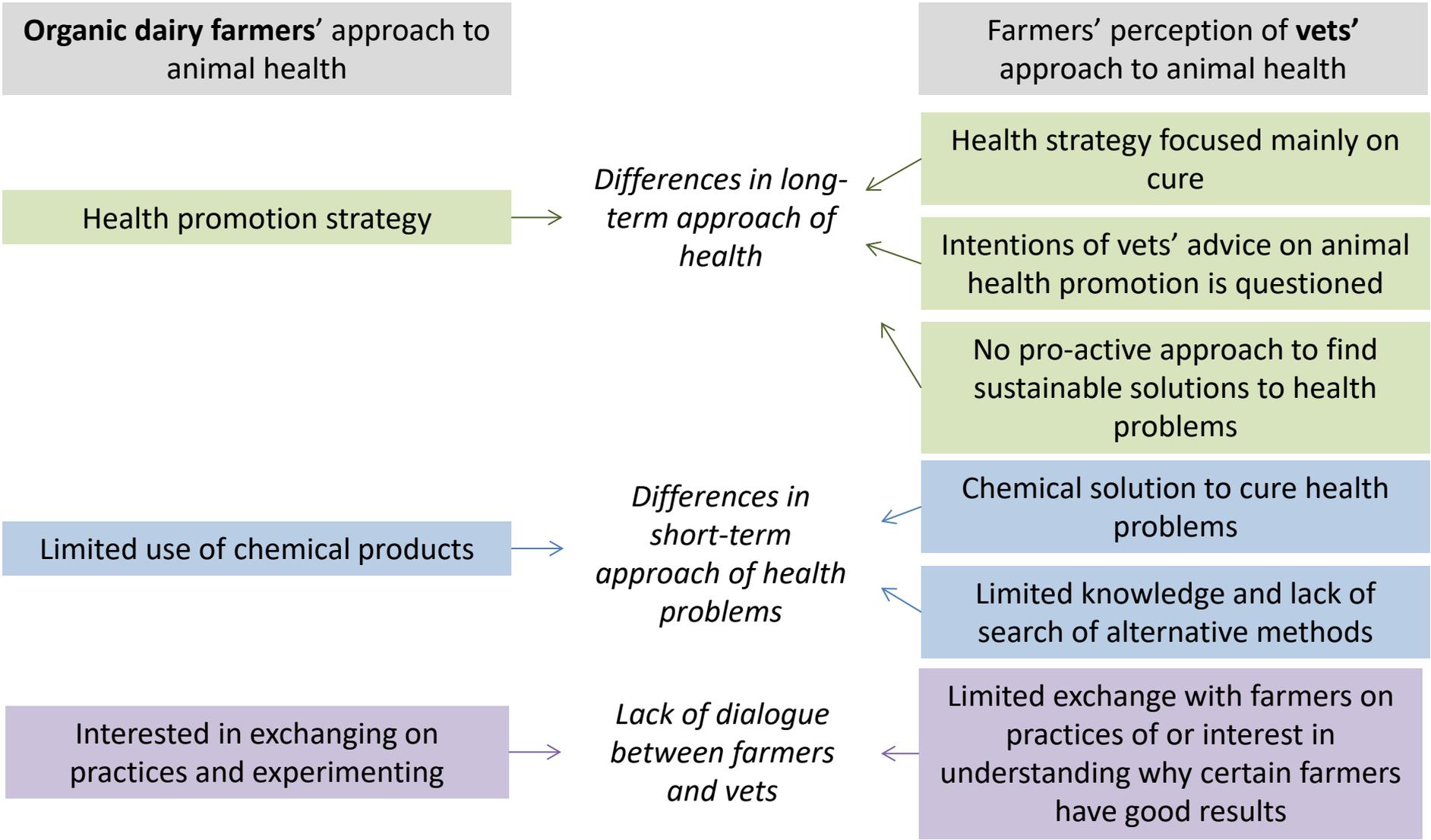
- Willingness to stop the use of pesticides, reduce the use of allopathic treatments on animals, and/or farmers search for overall 'improved quality of life'
- Better valorisation of farm products and ensure economic viability of the farm

Organic dairy farmers' animal health strategy = **animal health promotion strategy**

- Based on: **feed quality**, use adapted genetic material, housing conditions, hygiene measures, surveillance and timely human care-taking

Results: understanding veterinarians' roles in organic dairy farms

Mismatch between farmers animal health approach with the perceived approach of vets



Vets perceived that the organic farming system interfere with their animal health management approach



Examples:

Organic principles

Why do organic farmers prioritize naturalness over animal welfare?

Organic regulation

Why does the organic regulation promote the use of alternative medicine over chemical drugs?

Individual farmers' goals, health approach, and constraints...

How to overcome situations of different health approaches between farmer and vet?

Main barriers identified influencing veterinarians' willingness to invest in organic farming

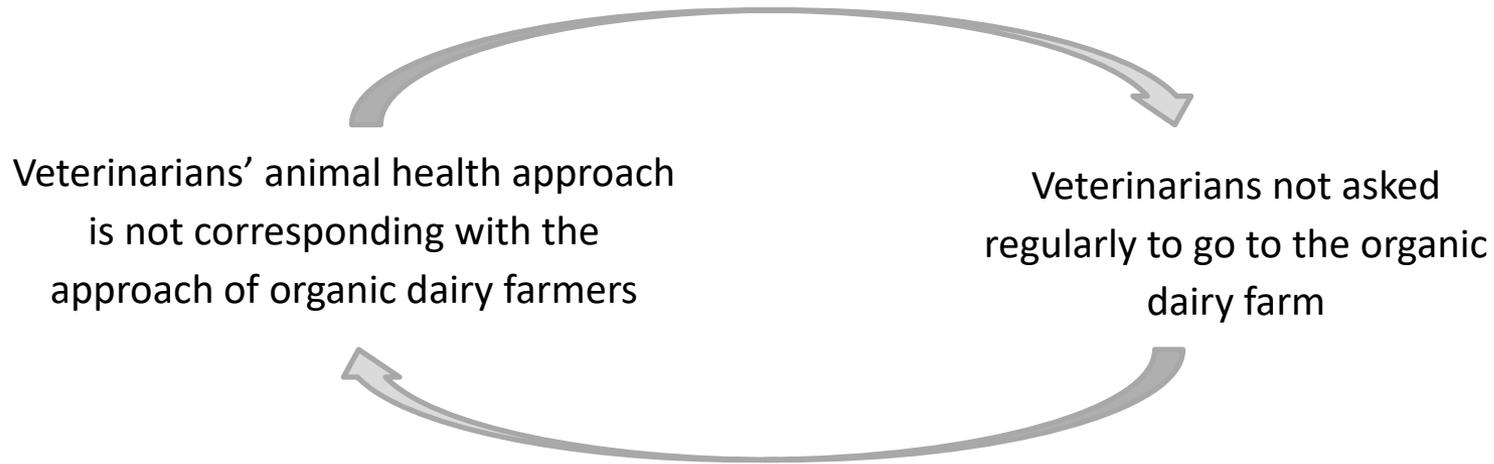
- **Low importance of the organic dairy sector**

***Veterinarian 15:** 'It is certain that if we would have 50 organic farms, I think that we would be...maybe we would be more attentive to or be more implicated in, in the organic sector. But since they are so few, and we rarely see them, they are part of the farms that are set a part a little bit'*

- **Variety in veterinarians' motivation towards promoting herd health advisory services**

- ***Veterinarian 11:** 'The annual mandatory visit should be a key-entrance point for the veterinarians. If it is not, they are not doing their job well. It is not because the farmers don't call that they don't have any problems.'*
- ***Veterinarian 12:** 'We do the annual mandatory visit because it is obliged by law, but is has no value hmm...it has no professional value for the farmer.'*

Situation of an impasse in the relationship between organic dairy farmers and veterinarians



- **Animal health promotion has the potential to be the common area of interest**
 - Farmers asked for more support in disease prevention
 - Vets identified the need to improve and possess the skills and knowledge
- **To find adapted and acceptable solutions there is a need for:**
 - Common effort of farmers and veterinarians to keep the dialogue going
 - Improvement of the mutual understanding of each others approach of animal health and its motivations

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Veterinarians' opinion on organic dairy farming based on animal health and welfare situations



Vision of organic farming based on animal health and welfare situations explains that in the eyes of veterinarians the EU regulation can discredit organic farming.

***Veterinarian 1:** 'Ehm, well...well the...the agriculture, the labour of the land in organic, I think it is good. The organic rearing of animals, I think it is rubbish, I think that is ehm...already, the norms that are fixed now make no more sense because ehm...three treatments, three diseases per cow per year, ehm...all our farmers are organic, regarding the animal health part*

→ Question the added value of organic dairy farming

Results: understanding veterinarians' roles in organic dairy farms

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