After 14 years in practice, Phil Elkins tells us why he made the move to developing innovative farm health solutions.

Phil Elkins qualified as a veterinary surgeon in 2005; he went into mixed practice and then farm practice in the UK and New Zealand, before settling at Westpoint Farm Vets in Cornwall in 2009. Phil opened a second branch in the West Country, where he worked for 10 years, growing the branch to a team of nine vets. Phil was director of Westpoint Farm Vets for his last three years with the practice and Chair of the Clinical Governance Board for the last two. In May 2019, he made the decision to leave Westpoint and join the team at Prognostix – an innovation-driven animal health company that aims to improve disease prevention and boost performance of farm animals.

What were the key drivers in your move from veterinary practice to animal health innovation?

The number one factor was the direction that Prognostix is looking to head in. We’re trying to take veterinary knowledge and put a different spin on it, and trying to adapt and drive solutions to future challenges.

The clinical governance within Westpoint is something I am incredibly proud of and I am really happy to be associated with the business. I was just looking at the clinical veterinary practice and seeing a lack of investment in innovation; corporatisation can bring a lack of willingness to take risks and a view towards short-term returns.

Innovation always comes with a risk and the returns are more long term. You need to see things through and accept the fact that you might not get any money out of it for the next 12, 24 or 36 months. This can be a hard sell to a business that is ultimately based on giving returns to its investors.

You’ve also got a situation where farmers are looking to change their relationships with vets. The economics of a vet treating a sick animal generally don’t fare as well as lots of other investments on the farm. There’s a lot of rhetoric about it being more about the prevention of disease, which was probably the new thing 10 years ago. Now, it’s much more about optimisation of performance – with prevention of disease forming part of that.

My concern is that traditional veterinary practice is putting itself in a difficult place by not innovating quickly enough and allowing associated industries a head start in these areas.

How will Prognostix improve farm animal practice?

Prognostix is taking data from multiple sources, some of which are our own hardware and software, and analysing it to give vets, consultants and farmers the tools to predict when diseases are likely to happen. We will define early warning signs for disease – even for things that are going to be precursors for disease – and, taking that to the next stage, early warning signs for things that are going to challenge performance. This should provide the tools on the farm basis to optimise the systems.

For the main project at the moment – which is about respiratory disease in calves – on a farm basis, we can predict which calves are going to get sick because their feeding behaviour changes a couple of days beforehand and their temperature starts to peak (which we see through the constant temperature monitoring via rumen boluses). We can tie that in with environmental sensors and say that we know that on a particular farm, when the temperature in the shed goes above a threshold, you’re likely to get disease in a week’s time. You can then put a flag up to the farmer and say, “get the temperature down quickly to stop the animals getting sick in the first place”.

How will artificial intelligence change farm practice?