

Cultural awareness for veterinarians working with LatinX livestock caretakers

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Abstract

Work done by Colorado State University researchers has highlighted the human-animal bond that exists on dairy and other livestock operations, and the perceptions of animal caretakers regarding animal health and euthanasia decisions. There is a clear need for culturally responsive training to better prepare animal caretakers to make end-of-life decisions in a timely manner while reducing the emotional burden associated with euthanasia decision making. While veterinarians are well positioned to provide leadership in health management and end-of-life decision-making processes, they are seldom involved in the creation and facilitation of training programs for livestock caretakers. Cultural differences that may limit effective communication and training can be overcome by engaging livestock caretakers with approaches proven effective in both research and practice settings.

Key words: communication, wellbeing, training, culture

Introduction

Veterinary practitioners are a valuable but underutilized resource to livestock operations, especially in the creation and facilitation of training programs about health management and end-of-life decision making. Although veterinarians have the expertise needed to advise and train livestock caretakers (workers and their supervisors), they are not often involved in the end-of-life decision making or training on dairy operations.¹ Instead, very commonly, caretakers are responsible for identifying compromised animals and making the decision to provide medical treatment, cull or euthanize. The extent and quality of training offered to caretakers varies within operation and between operations.^{2,3,4} Consistent and culturally responsive training has been identified as an area of need as the livestock industry strives to improve animal and human wellbeing.^{4,5}

The intersection of human and animal wellbeing on dairy operations

Dairy caretakers understand that health management and end-of-life decisions affect animal wellbeing, and that euthanasia is a tool to stop animal suffering. Recently surveyed dairy caretakers in Colorado reported feeling empathy and sharing a human-animal bond with dairy cattle under their care, and clearly expressed the emotional burden associated with deciding to euthanize an animal.⁴ Additionally, caretakers spoke about competing interests that make end-of-life decisions difficult, and the lack of understanding from people external to the dairy operation.⁴ While caretakers sought support in family or friends, they saw limitations to bringing work related stress home, and none was aware of available mental health resources.⁴

The same survey revealed that end-of-life decision training varied significantly between dairies. Caretakers suggested that euthanasia training should be available to all employees of dairy

farms to increase everyone's understanding of and comfort with making end-of-life decisions.⁴ Caretakers offered ideas for training programs that included presenting case studies and facilitating group discussions to normalize euthanasia conversations and increase their confidence with end-of-life decisions.

Engaging livestock caretakers

While cultural and language differences and other factors unique to foreign-born livestock caretakers may pose a challenge to veterinary practitioners, a growing body of research and outreach work should prove helpful to those interested in having a more significant role in the creation and facilitation of much needed health management and end-of-life decision training programs.

Don't forget about the basics

A common mistake when training animal caretakers is to assume that they share a veterinarian's knowledge of animal behavior and physiology. Previous work has highlighted serious knowledge gaps that could contribute to animal and human health and safety challenges.² Reviewing the basics ensures that all members of the animal care team have a core knowledge to make decisions conducive to increased animal wellbeing.

Employ culturally responsive strategies

When facilitating training, knowing one's audience, and understanding best strategies to engage them in the learning process makes a difference. Recommended approaches, proven effective for LatinX workers, include focusing on the "how" and "why" of protocols, consulting workers regarding logistics of the training sessions, fostering leadership skills by having peers be responsible for portions of the training, and including management in the training development process.⁶ Additionally, training should be relevant to the caretakers' everyday realities and inclusive in content and delivery.

Speaking Spanish (or the native language of the trainees) can facilitate communication but is not enough. Livestock caretakers understand that language can be negotiated and don't see language difference as the greatest threat. To minimize communication challenges, one must choose interpreters who are trusted by dairy caretakers and with no perceived conflict of interests.

To sell an idea, you must listen first

Effective trainers are, in fact, selling an idea to their audience. The idea might be why it is important to identify sick animals earlier or why a new parlor routine is essential for udder health. In order to sell the idea effectively and have the buy-in of the learners, the trainer must understand the learners' perceptions about the problem in question, be able to communicate their role in solving the problem, and clearly describe the benefits of adopting the new idea or approach to addressing the problem.

Effective trainers listen well to get to know their audience. A veterinarian is well-positioned to engage in small talk with caretakers during routine visits to the livestock operation. Beside identifying perceptions and knowledge and skill deficits to be covered during training sessions, small talk allows veterinarians to provide informal feedback and develop good relationships with animal caretakers.

Conclusion

While training a culturally diverse group of animal caretakers might seem daunting, veterinarians are well-positioned to be actively involved in the creation and facilitation of effective training programs. Employing culturally responsive training strategies and understanding caretaker perceptions around specific problems could help the veterinarian better the wellbeing of animals and humans on the livestock operation.

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