

Building consulting into dairy practice

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Abstract

The opportunity exists for bovine veterinarians to continue to be relevant to the producers they serve, even as the scale of the operations and the needs of the producers change.

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Introduction

There may continue to be veterinarians who make the majority of their living providing traditional services (pregnancy diagnosis, sick cow work, etc.), but an increasing percentage of cows will be on dairies where the owners and managers do not see value in having a veterinarian directly provide those services. An alternative practice model is often referred to as “consulting”. While consulting (giving expert advice) opportunities exist, other possible descriptions of a sustained veterinary-client relationship might include terms like: management team member, trainer, coach and animal health and production monitor. I will provide some general ideas on a practice model that includes those roles.

The model

Clarifying and defining who/what the patient is that one cares for is critical in a veterinarian’s relationship with a client. While the bovine itself is a bovine veterinarian’s legal patient, as defined in a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR), I view my patient as being the entire dairy organization and its associated enterprises. If any part of the organization is not healthy or well run, there is risk that bovine health will be compromised. Those situations present an opportunity for veterinarians to be part of the conversation in identifying those bottlenecks and coming up with plans to address them.

Given the complexity of many dairies and their associated enterprises, one cannot be an expert in all areas of the dairy organization or focus on all areas at once. But one can become knowledgeable in several areas and conversant in many.

The areas of opportunity and focus vary from dairy-to-dairy and vary within a dairy over time. They can range from areas directly related to animal health and performance: employee training, udder health, parlor performance, reproduction, youngstock and foot health, to areas that, while less associated with a veterinary knowledge base, can clearly affect animal health: employee housing, workplace culture, forage harvest, feed bunk management, facilities and expansion planning.

Conclusion

There are many opportunities for veterinarians to be relevant and useful to dairy farms of the future. I believe that most of those opportunities will not involve traditional veterinary medicine, but rather will involve animal health oversight through employee training and a collaborative systems approach for identifying bottlenecks and opportunities.

