

What veterinarians need to know about producers' perceptions in order to optimize their role as advisors for key animal care issues in dairy herds

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Introduction

Animal care concerns, and thus animal care assessments have been increasing within the dairy industry (Mench, 2003). In Canada, a national Animal Care Assessment has just been implemented which utilizes animal based measures such as lameness and hock injuries (DFC, 2017). Veterinarians and producers in Canada agree that the top management issue on dairy farms is animal welfare and the number one health concern on dairy farms is lameness (Bauman et al 2016), and they agree that 'supporting animal health and welfare decisions' are major roles of the veterinarian (Hall and Wapenaar, 2012). However, to date, there are no in depth qualitative publications investigating dairy producer's expectations on the role of veterinarians as advisors for animal welfare issues (i.e. lameness, hock injuries). The objective of this study was to explore dairy farmer's perceptions of the role of the veterinarian as it pertains to communicating and consulting on animal care, and to gain insight into barriers that prevent animal care improvement through veterinarians.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative data was collected through focus groups, conducted to obtain detailed information about both personal and group feelings (Krueger, 2014). Farmers were recruited through advertisements from key informants such as veterinarians or nutritionists, and through snowball recruitment where farmers invited other farmers. The participant eligibility criteria was being at least 18 years old, and a dairy farmer owning or leasing quota in Ontario. Recognizing that there is some interpretation within the analysis of qualitative work, rigor was incorporated by utilizing systematic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data were first examined live during the interviews, and later by listening to the audio before transcription (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Working codes were developed by highlighting segments and creating labels in the transcripts. This process was completed using ©Quirkos Limited (2017), an application that allows annotation and creates an audit trail. Codes were connected

or separated through a process of developing working themes and patterns in the data and placed in a codebook (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Identification of themes important to the veterinarian's role occurred through 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' and codes (Creswell, 2013; Crabtree and Miller, 1999).

Results

Five focus groups of farmers (n= 36), took place in distinct regions of Ontario, Canada. Participant ages ranged from 21 to 80 (median = 47). Representative herd size ranged from 25 to 550 (median = 75). Farm type included 'free-stall' (n=14) and 'tie-stall' (n=22). Preliminary thematic analysis of the producer discussions suggest that 1) veterinarians are in a position to advise farmers to improve animal care, 2) in order for veterinarians to be effective, they must bridge the disconnect between producer's expectations of herd health visits, and achievable detection of certain animal care issues on farm (i.e. detection of herd level lameness prevalence) 3) farmers have different preferences for vet-client communication strategies when addressing animal care issues on farm (i.e. highlighting positive feedback while providing the animal care suggestion 4) there are potential veterinarian-client relationship repercussions when a veterinarian does not bring up animal care issues, if the farmer is alerted to that problem from an outside source.

Significance

Learning from these outcomes, large animal veterinarians should be able to better recognize their client's expectations, and work to remedy the barriers which prevent improvement in overall animal care. By discovering how different farmers think and feel about the veterinarian's role in animal care, veterinarians can strategically plan and appropriately allocate resources to increase the uptake of best practices in their client's herds, in order to improve the welfare of the animals under their care.