

The Veterinarian's Role in Safe Beef Production

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Beef, real food for real people. Some of the real people that we are talking about have real concerns. They are developing an attitude about their concerns for food safety. In the Senate Subcommittee meeting this past summer, a consumer activist was quoted, "Next to nuclear weapons, animal agriculture and its affiliates pose the greatest threat to life on this planet." I am a veterinarian, but I am also a cattleman, a real person, too. A producer that has real concerns. A veterinarian that has real concerns about my future in animal agriculture. Less than 2% of the population of the United States today is involved in agriculture. The 98% of the population, the consuming public, know very little about what we do to provide the food that sustains life on this planet. Their perception of what we do is a great concern to them. They are concerned that we are not responsible with the foodstuffs we influence and are concerned that lack of responsibility may relate to long-term problems in their lives and in the lives of their children. As a veterinarian, as a cattleman, I have real concerns, too. My life has been dedicated to beef production. The illness versus wellness issue of cattle is a real concern to all of us, veterinarians and producers.

The bottom line of the issue is strictly people. People who raise beef, people who are responsible for the health of the beef and people who eat beef.

There are a number of events that have occurred during the last 5 years that will, in the future, influence the way we, as food animal veterinarians, approach our responsibilities and will influence the way we provide for our clients and our families. A brief history on the topic is in order. Approximately 5 years ago, the government approached leaders in the beef industry with a mandate to develop a quality assurance program. They called that program "The Residue Avoidance Program" or "RAP". At that time, Dr. John Spalding from the FSIS Science Section was responsible from the government's side for seeing that program develop. The outline to be used would be a quality assurance program that had previously been in place and successfully carried out in the poultry industry. The first beef operation to put that program in place was in Oklahoma. The outline of that program was as follows:

All sources of feedstuffs and cattle were to be surveyed to qualify the cattle and feedstuffs as clean at a starting point. The production of the cattle, medications used and the management of those medications, were to be supervised by qualified professionals, such as veterinarians and nutritionists, such that the end product entering the food chain was assured to be clean of

volatile residues.

The monitoring of that program was carried out by the Operations Section of the FSIS. In the simplest terms, that program today has been very successful. It has led to a branded product now on the market that carries the label "VPC" for verified production control. There are several such programs in existence today and many more on the way. As of last fall, over 60% of cattle feeding operations in the Southwest United States have signed an intent to develop such a program in their organizations. For those of us veterinarians who work daily in the beef industry, it provides an opportunity to work at a level in beef production we have seldom enjoyed in the past. It, perhaps for the first time, gives real credence to our veterinarian's oath. To paraphrase, the promotion of public health, the advancement of medical knowledge to practice our profession conscientiously, with dignity and in keeping with the principles of veterinarian medical ethics. But it goes beyond our safety of beef consumed. We cannot do it alone. Tremendous pressures are placed on us daily by clients that have severe health problems in their livestock operations asking us to use all of our available knowledge to relieve suffering in their animals and conserve their livestock resources, thereby preventing economic disaster in their operations.

Beyond that meager start 5 years ago, today we have several organizations that are working with us to develop a complete and balanced attitude toward beef production. Last year the National Cattlemen's Association initiated a task force in beef safety assurance. Following a successful year working within the beef industry, they developed a number of consensus points.

Now more than ever the beef producer needs to pay closer attention to consumers to understand their concerns and their perception about beef. There is a new generation of cattlemen. They are more concerned now than ever about their responsibilities for they understand that only through their ability to provide for the consumer's wants and needs relating to beef safety, will they and their future generations survive. They also understand that regulation of their operation by outside government agencies and outside interest groups are becoming a way of life in their operation. Safety assurance is now, in many cases and will become more so in all situations, literally a de facto requirement of doing business in the beef industry and that includes you and I as veterinarians. They understand verified control and will welcome it in the future. They understand that verified control of their operations will alleviate many of the consumers concerns about the hidden mysteries in the

production of beef. Proper utilization of biologics, implants, growth promotants, medications to treat illness will involve not only them, but you and me. We now have the best responsibility to play a significant role in the production of beef. We will become to the beef industry in the future as the accountants have become a de facto requirement of you and me doing our own business; neither one of us today operates our business without a qualified accountant. In the future, the beef industry will not operate without a qualified food animal veterinarian.

Another point recognized by the NCA is the liability for the products they produce, the liabilities for the use of safe drugs, and acquirement of safe foodstuffs to produce those animals. These liabilities will focus the producer to provide more efficient means of tracking an animal's life history through the food chain. It gives a whole new meaning to the words "prescription drug" in our particular case, because we, along with the beef producer, will share the liability. Residue testing will go beyond the drug's license for use in cattle today. It will go beyond the testing of beef as it enters the food chain, and we will become involved in residue testing at the auction markets. We will also become involved in residue testing as cattle enter the last feeding cycle, that last 4-5 months of the production chain. As residues become more clearly defined, regulations that we exert on each other as professionals will enhance. The working relationship between the FDA and our profession will increase.

Not many years ago, the drugs available for us to treat animals were limited only by those that we could legally obtain. Today, we all work under the extra label guidelines, but those are only guidelines of policy, they are not law. We will see those guidelines stiffen even more. In the past, we have made, as a large part of our practice, the dispensing of medications. Many times, medications were compounded in our clinics and in the future we will see less of that. As the law exists today, it is strictly illegal to compound medications in our clinic and I doubt, because of our relationship with the consumers, that those laws will be changed to give us those rights. The consumer will not tolerate any perceived lack of control in their food supply.

From time to time I'm asked by producers and fellow veterinarians, "What will we do? The medications we have now don't work." The answer, "I'm not sure." We have made

great strides in the alleviation of suffering of animals through management changes. We will rely more heavily on management and less and less on the use of medications. As veterinarians, if we are to continue to play a part in the role of beef production, we will adapt to those new requirements. We will adapt to provide service much as our CPA's have adapted to provide service to us; they are no longer bookkeepers but confidants and counselors in matters of money management. We will be the same to the beef industry—personnel management, environmental management. We will work closer with other professionals that touch the beef industry such as nutritionists. In all 50 states there will be pending legislation on what's to be known as the Model Drug Code that will give stricter definition to the use and management of medications in our practice and in the operations of our clients in beef production. How we interface with these requirements is yet to be known, but it is to be. You and I have recognized for years that proper management of animals, proper use of medications and feedstuffs make our clients much more money than the fire engine-type services that they frequently ask us to provide. We will have tremendous help as regulatory agencies and consumer groups place pressure on our producers to take advantage of the knowledge we possess today. Beef production in the future will involve a greater veterinary role. Generations of veterinarians in the past have quite literally been a member of the family in many operations. We traded services for milk and cheese, racing between farms to treat one more sick cow. The present generation of veterinarians still works similar to what our predecessors have done, but the pressure to change is readily apparent.

The generations of veterinarians to come may not have in their practice repertoire the treating of an individual animal except a rare instance, but will find themselves caught up as health professionals. Whatever direction our profession takes, future generations of veterinarians will be required to be much closer to the pulse of beef production. We work in a great industry, an industry that serves the public by converting forage to food for man. Beef, real food for real people. We're the real people. We, the veterinarians and the producers, that will provide the food in the changing perception and concerns of the public we serve.