

Advantages of Clinic Versus Ambulatory Practice

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On this past Thursday afternoon the temperature outside was a minus 15 degrees and there was a northwest wind of 12 to 15 miles per hour. The radio was announcing that the wind chill factor was approximately minus 40 degrees! This is definitely the time to really enjoy the benefits of an "in clinic" practice. This particular afternoon was spent in the confines of the clinic doing surgery which would have been impossible to perform in the pole barns or the feedlots. Yes, one of the great advantages of a clinic practice is being able to perform our services in a nice warm area rather than in the bitter cold of the lots and barns.

At this time I would like to describe our practice to you. Jamestown is in the south central part of North Dakota. It is a town of around 15,000 population. Our practice area is approximately 50 square miles. The majority of our bovine practice is a cow-calf operation, with a few feedlots and grade-A dairies. We have four veterinarians employed at the clinic. One does exclusively small animal practice during the regular clinic hours. The other three of us do all of the large animal practice and help out in the small animal area if needed.

Nine years ago my partner and I decided to expand our clinic facilities to include a large animal area. At that time we were told that we were foolish because people said: "I will never bring an animal into your clinic"; or "You wouldn't expect me to haul a sick critter, would you?" Now these very same people have become some of our best "in clinic" clients. Actually, the use of the clinic facilities started out slowly, but as people became accustomed to bringing animals in and the number of stock trailers increased, our clinic practice flourished.

The secret to our success in building our clinic practice was showing the rancher that we could give him a better service in the clinic than we could on his ranch. This amounted to a large scale educational program on our part. It meant that our clinic facilities had to be clean, that someone had to be available at all times, and that we had to perform a good fast service. At no time did we stress the fact that it would be cheaper for them to come to the clinic than have us come to the farm,

although it usually saves them money because it eliminates our mileage charge. Very rarely have we ever refused to make a country call, but we will explain to them that we can't leave the clinic when there are people waiting. So, if they wish for us to come, they will have to wait for a break at the clinic. After explaining that there may be several hours involved, they will find a way to bring the animal in.

To show you what we did in our practice the past year, we broke our practice down into three categories: small animal clinic, large animal clinic, and ambulatory. The small animal clinic resulted in 19% of the practice, the large animal clinic in 44%, and the ambulatory 37%. These percentages were figured on the gross dollars received from our professional services. There are no drugs, mileage or etc. included, just the actual veterinary services performed.

As I have previously mentioned, one of the greatest advantages of a clinic practice is being able to work inside in a clean, well lighted area that is out of the weather and oftentimes sloppy conditions of the farmyard. On most occasions, the handling facilities of our clinic are far better than what we find on the farms. However, I will admit that the livestock handling facilities on the ranches in our area have improved greatly in the past few years. The presence of a large animal operating table has lessened the task of hoof and leg work. A better selection of drugs is available in the clinic than on the farm. Even with practice vehicles, it seems impossible to carry everything that is needed. The use of laboratory facilities is available to help make a better diagnosis. Many times there may be need for consultation with one of our colleagues in making a diagnosis. In our practice, we are willing to work together on surgical cases or, sometimes, just give moral support. Reference materials are readily available and can be used to help make a diagnosis.

Time saved in a clinic practice is perhaps the most important advantage. As we all know, the veterinarian gets paid only for the time that he is actually providing his client a service. Much valuable time can be lost driving a vehicle from one

farm to the next. Time that cannot be turned into income. In the clinic, if there is time between cases, it can be used to clean up the area or to prepare for the next client.

We know that in the Veterinarians' Creed it says that we should measure our success by the value of the service we render rather than by the fee we receive. This is very true, but I believe that if you render a good service, you can charge a good fee. Really, what I'm trying to say is that in our clinic practice we have been better paid for our time and knowledge.

I'm sure that in our practice, our clinic was one of our better practice builders. Each year our practice grows, and most of the growth comes in the large animal clinic area. Financially, we are much better with a clinic practice than we were with an ambulatory practice. Not only has our gross dollar volume increased, but the percentage of our net income has increased also.

The advantages of an "in clinic" practice over an ambulatory practice are many. However, I'm the first to admit that there are disadvantages. One of the major disadvantages of a clinic practice is the tension. The pressure is continuous: going from one case to the next can be very fatiguing, not only physically but also mentally. When on ambulatory calls, you can relax and get away from people while driving your vehicle. This is the time when you can be alone and enjoy some peace and quiet which you seldom find in a clinic practice.

Another disadvantage is that it is your responsibility to keep your facilities as clean and disease free as possible. Usually this chore is delegated to your lay help, but it is still your responsibility to see that it gets done between each case. The possibility of spreading diseases from your clinic can be very minimal if a good job of cleaning and disinfecting is done.

Another major disadvantage is that you get a lot of money invested in clinical facilities and equipment. When you operate both an ambulatory and a clinic practice, you need a lot of duplication of equipment. This expense does raise your overhead costs. You also require more lay help in a clinic because it seems that if the rancher brings an animal to you, he expects you to care for it. On the farm, he will furnish help to work on the animals.

Our ambulatory practice is composed of routine herd work such as pregnancy testing, vaccinating, castrating and dehorning. We also treat disease outbreaks in large groups of cattle and those emergency cases—milk fever and downer animals, etc.—that are impossible to move. We would like to have all of our obstetrical, surgical and individually sick animals brought to the clinic. We do ask that people bring in cases of prolapsed uterus and vagina if they are able to stand; however, we do request that all prolapsed animals, be it uterine, vaginal, or rectal, be tied to keep the animal from mutilating the tissues. We have never asked for a milk fever to be brought in; however, we receive several each year. Two things that we refuse to do on the farm are semen evaluation of bulls and hoof trimming. Our reasoning here is that every time someone is off with the ejaculator and microscope, two more clients are waiting at the clinic with their bulls. The large animal table is the only type of restraint that can satisfactorily be used to trim a bull's feet.

There probably are many more advantages and disadvantages of a clinic practice versus an ambulatory practice. I am sure that each individual can give a list, and no two would be the same. I'm also sure that a clinic practice would not be practical in many areas and that an ambulatory practice would be very profitable and rewarding.