

SOME OF THE DIFFICULT ASPECTS OF GETTING INTO PRODUCTION MEDICINE
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Production medicine is the newest kid on the block and by all indications is the future of veterinary medicine. This challenge has frightened many veterinarians and have made their futures unclear. I have found production medicine to be one of the most rewarding programs I have ever offered to my clients and is now the backbone of a successful practice. I have been asked today to discuss the difficulties that went into making a production medicine program work and I hope to share these with you.

The most difficult part of getting into production medicine is to learn all the information you need to be successful. This requires intensive CE courses and many hundreds of hours of home learning at nights when all the other work is done. Being qualified to practice production medicine is not something that is learned at most veterinary colleges. As the colleges recognized the demands of the dairy farmer has changed, they too are trying to change and provide a better education to their students. After taking the time to learn nutrition, mastitis control, housing, economics, heifer rearing and other areas of production medicine, you then have to pick one or two of your best clients and do some trial and error work. Many times this work ends of being done for free or at a reduced rate. I would strongly urge you not to go out and practice on someone that you do not have a good relationship with first.

Your first experiences may determine your whole future. If the experiences are bad, chances are you will turn away from production medicine but if the experiences are the least bit positive, chances are it will stimulate you to go even further. Production medicine programs challenge both you and your clients. I guess that is what makes this concept so rewarding.

When I got all fired up on production medicine, I thought I could just walk onto a farm and tell them it was time to do this new program. However much to my surprise, the dairy farmer was satisfied with what we were already doing and wondered why they should change.

The most important item to determine is what the farmers goals are. You will find in many situations that the dairy farmer's goals are different than yours. If you both don't have a common goal the program will surely fail. This is a constant stumbling block for all practitioners to get over. You will quickly find out that many of your farmers do not share the same excitement you do. Many comment that you must of been to another meeting again.

It is important to have the dairy farmers confidence before trying production medicine programs. You still must be able to diagnosis a disease and be able to treat it successfully before a farmer will ever give you any credibility. Production medicine programs come after a veterinarian has been able to have many years of successful practice. Not many farmers have confidence in someone that does not have any experience yet claims to be able to identify and solve their problems.

The only way I know for a veterinarian to properly identify the problems and then prioritize them is to clearly understand the records system the dairy farmer uses. You need to determine all problem areas and then figure out which ones can impact the farms future the most. Unfortunately you will find a great deal of resistance and the farmer will point out that they have always done it this way or have never done it this way. It is up to you to have the confidence to convince the dairy farmer it is time to change. Change is never easy and your skills are required to get it done.

Getting a client to trust you to the point of sharing their "sacred financial" information can be one of the most difficult challenges you face. You need this information if you want to help them not only survive but thrive. You need to identify areas of poor economic performance and then look to ways to improve that end of the operation. Many times by correcting the biggest financial problems on a farm, you can indeed change the future of the farm. This is the newest area of production medicine that everyone feels uncomfortable with. How can a dairy farmer survive or thrive if they don't even know what it cost them to produce a hundred pounds of milk? It is your job to help them determine this number and then figure out ways to get it in line with the price they are being paid for their milk. You will have the biggest frustration with this part of your program. The farmer is least willing to work with you here regardless of the economic condition of their farm.

One of the hardest obstacles to overcome is your own fears of not being qualified to handle the problems that exist. Having the confidence to identify problems and not necessarily solve the problems is the key. If you don't feel comfortable balancing a ration that is fine, but you need enough nutrition skill to at least evaluate the ration that is being fed. The same is true for milking equipment evaluation or housing evaluation or whatever the task you are taking on. You don't have to solve all problems, but it is essential to be able to identify them. I have heard many veterinarians say they are not nutritionists or engineers but that is not what production medicine is all about. You need to identify problems and then rely on resource people to supply the answers.

You must remember that the results are never in your control. Many veterinarians get frustrated because the results are not always positive. The results are only in the control of the farmer and many times the response is not positive because the farmer is not following your advice properly. Many practitioners give up too soon on production medicine because they feel too responsible for the end results. You must accept responsibility for the problems you have identified but not for the results of the change. The key here is to be properly monitoring all changes so you can identify why the change is not positive.

I have had my fair share of frustrations when starting to implement production medicine in my practice but the persistence has paid off. You will find that production medicine programs change you from that "good old doc" image to that dirty "SOB" image instead. Now that you have taken an active role in the dairy farmers economic future, you will have to step on toes of those that are doing much of the work. Your credibility will be constantly attacked by the other fractions of the dairy farmers operation. Questions such as "I thought he was just a veterinarian", or "I didn't know your veterinarian was a nutritionist" or "What makes him qualified to discuss milking equipment" will always be present and it seems as though you are constantly defending yourself. The key is not to get into a mud throwing contest but instead focus on helping the dairy farmer either survive or thrive. The end results of your efforts will answer the questions in your dairy clients mind. Be persistent and don't back down unless you know you are wrong. When you waver on your suggestions, the dairy farmer begins to question your credibility. You have to be accountable for your suggestions.

Production medicine is the future of veterinary medicine and I am very happy that I have decided to make it part of my practice. Even though I have faced many difficulties, I thrive on the controversy that often time exists. More importantly, over time the other players in this dairy farmers operation have realized that I am there to help the farmer survive and thrive and they are now beginning to respect me for my efforts. They no longer look at me as a threat but instead consider me an ally to their own businesses. They now call on me for advice rather than attack my credibility. I guess this is why I continued to work on production medicine programs rather than abandon the idea.