

Implementation of Production Medicine In Cow-Calf Operations

Donald Hansen, D.V.M., M.P.V.M.

*Extension Veterinarian
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97331-4802*

I feel very honored to be a part of this General Session. First, because I feel that implementing production medicine is more important for the survival of the food animal practitioner than ever before. Second, because I feel it is an honor to be on the same program with so many of the people who have been my mentors, and whom I consider to be leaders of the profession.

We have heard some very excellent ideas from today's speakers. We have been advised to: play to our strengths, change our self-image and clients' image of us; address our clients' needs; and to document goals and our progress towards them. There is not too much that I can add; however, I would like to share some concerns for our future and some ideas that are working for me and others in helping the cow-calf operators reach their goals.

Let me begin by giving you some ideas that shaped my attitude and professional approach toward myself and my clients. The first one is "**People are not wrong, just misinformed.**" This idea allows me to realize that most people really try to make "best" decisions in each area of their lives. They gather information from different sources, weigh it, sort it, and then move. It occurred to me that many of my clients made decisions that were counter productive because they were lacking key pieces of information and clear objectives and goals.

Many ranchers are so busy with day-to-day projects that they lose sight of the bigger picture and some others fail to set out clear long-term objectives and goals. For some of these ranchers balancing the ranch resources is like looking at a picture puzzle spread out on a table. They know the pieces all fit together, they just don't have the time they need to put it together. I have found that there is a place here for the veterinarian, one who has some people skills and organizational and leadership abilities. I discovered that applying these skills with my clients has helped them to define goals and make more productive decisions. With the attitude that people are seeking the best information, failures can be turned into feedback for change, I can discuss programs with my clients and keep the focus on the problem or goal and away from personalities. It helps to keep the situation in a win-win mode from the very beginning.

I sought additional training and information in areas of nutrition, farm and business management, negotiation

and persuasion skills as well as economics and epidemiology. I have defined production medicine for myself and clients as management to achieve predetermined performance and profit targets. I expanded the definition of disease for my clients. I took the idea from several people but today I am quoting from Thomas Stein's "Marketing Health Management." "Disease is a deviation between what is happening and what is expected." These definitions have helped to broaden my view of my clients' operations and my clients' views of health parameters in production medicine. In my country, increased production does not always equal increased profit. I believe this broader vision helps me to be more efficient in addressing the clients' needs by establishing achievable objectives and goals and solving problems.

Another idea that helped to shape my attitude was given to me by my partner at the time, John Zimmerman. That idea was **to treat our clients' herds as if they were our own.** By adopting this idea, my clients' production and profit concerns, objectives, and goals became a part of me. I began to see myself as a partner in business with several livestock operators. It wasn't true, of course; that is, I wasn't actually a partner, but my perception of myself was one of partnership. This attitude dominated what I read, what information I sought at meetings such as the AABP, whom I talked to and what I talked about. It has pushed me beyond subjects taught in traditional veterinary curricula.

The reason I chose to begin with these ideas is to emphasize two points. Before you can implement any program you must prepare yourself. 1) If you discover and then supply your clients' needs, you will both profit. If the clients feel that you care, they are more likely to listen and adopt. 2) Expand your knowledge base to understand better and solve problems at the herd, ranch, or farm level. In other words, you become better equipped to understand the interaction and balance required to operate a modern ranch. I have found that what I think inside becomes what I do outside. This discovery has led me to the theory that one may **act as if, until it becomes true.** I have used this technique to change my self-image. The reality is that I am a long way from being the consultant I want to be someday, but I am even further away from being the fire-engine practitioner that I once was.

Since coming to the Northwest, my attention has been drawn to cow/calf production medicine in addition to dairy operations. Oregon's biggest agricultural commodity is the cow herd. We are a "mother-cow" state and sell most of our calves to out-of-state operators. Getting prepared and serving the cow-calf operator has been an interesting and somewhat alarming journey. There is plenty of non-veterinary competition for the clients' attention. In our region of the country the 'buckaroo' does all the deworming, vaccinating, implanting, castrating, dehorning, and in some case, even the preg. checks. Serving these owners' needs is a challenge to traditional veterinary medicine.

In order to find out how to approach clients, we conducted a survey among the cattlemen throughout the state. The questions were the same ones Dr. Wise asked in his national survey for the A.V.M.A., plus a few of our own. We asked if the rancher was satisfied with the status quo of veterinary services. If not, what additional skills or services would he like to have from his veterinarian? I am going to share some of our results with you because I believe they are relevant to today's session and perhaps even to our future. In our survey the status quo was defined as: knowledge of treating sick animals, accurate pregnancy examinations, and selling vaccines and drugs at a competitive price. Nearly all (93%-100%) thought that we communicated, treated the sick, and performed pregnancy diagnosis very well. Eighty-nine percent felt that we didn't know much about agribusiness. I am guessing that some of you are thinking right now, "That looks pretty good to me, that is just what I do for my clients." Let me give you something else to think about. Fifty-four percent of this group said that they use veterinarians only as a last resort. Does this mean if they could do without you altogether it would be okay, too? I wonder how many of us in the western region could stay in the cattle business if we only treated sick cattle?

Now, on what I believe is a more positive note, 45% of those surveyed wanted more from us. We rated highly with them in our ability to communicate our knowledge and skills in theriogenology; however, only 48% felt it was important to them to buy vaccines and drugs from us. These are the cattlemen that wanted change. Some of the areas they wanted more support in were: application of new knowledge, 25%; nutrition, 35%; and integrating health programs into the economics and management of the total ranch resources, 48%. There are some obvious opportunities which can be developed. Incorporating some of these needs into a plan will require acquisition of new knowledge, new skills, and not an insignificant amount of leadership on the part of the veterinarians. I am working with veterinarians now who are putting these concepts into their practices and would like to share with you some of their ideas and methods of programming. However, before I go any further, I feel that it needs to be said that these

programs are not necessarily for all veterinarians nor for everyone of your clients. On your part, you need additional skills and knowledge, especially people skills. I believe this concept goes beyond traditional individual animal medicine. Your clients will need to have a desire to change and/or improve. I do not believe this is a missionary job.

Now, one of the first constraints that we were confronted with was a lack of records. Talk about misinformation! Some of the clientele weren't even sure how many cows they owned, let alone which had calves or when. But they were willing to preg. check cows, to count calves as they were born, keep a written record of deaths and weight receipts at weaning time. The client can gather this information and record it. We use a small pocket book developed by the Idaho Extension Service called the "Red Book." It has a place to record most production and health data for a given ranch. The data is summarized by category (i.e., open cows, expected calving, actual calving, deaths, growth, etc.). We then tie this information back to the client's goals and add the pertinent economic impacts of each aspect on the overall ranch operation.

The secret of success in life is for a person to be ready for opportunity when it comes. Also, opportunities are usually disguised as hard work so most people don't recognize them. Being ready means doing your homework, developing a plan, and being able to present it in a logical and concise manner when your opportunity comes. If I write it out, it helps clear my thinking. If I rehearse a little, it helps my presentation. I tell you this because without these little tricks I find myself shooting from the hip. Like many others in the room, I thought I was pretty good at hip-shooting until I went through a couple of client meetings that way and missed my target. Sometime later, one gracious client said to me, "Is this what you were trying to tell me last summer? Man, I sure missed your point." I've tried to be well-prepared ever since.

"When and how?" may be two questions in your minds right now. First, let me tell you some times I have found are **not** good. Hardly ever at 3 AM, after resolving a dystocia, or right after posting 3 or 4 calves at the beginning of an outbreak, or while I'm doing preg. checks. I have found that at times like these the client is either not ready, not willing, or not able to consider my proposal fairly. At these times, I try to set up a better opportunity. I use comments such as "...you may already know this, but we could change this situation around more to your benefit. If you think you would be interested... I have several ideas... I have been through this before... I have a plan you could put in place... or whatever else fits the situation... Call me at the office and we will make an appointment to get together and discuss it." Since the whole idea is to get paid for your brain work, this move is always somewhat of a stomach-churner. You never know for sure if the client will call. But when you do get that call, it is because the

client wants something from you. Much better this way. It's his idea.

I find more ideal times are after I've finished a task such as: preg. checking, a bulk tank analysis, after the results come back from the diagnostic lab. At these times, I find the client more receptive and I try to set up a good meeting time and location. The best location is on neutral ground. I find a breakfast or dinner meeting at a restaurant to be good, and also, a meeting in the rancher's own home works well, if scheduled correctly. Once I get into the presentation, I feel the odds are a little in my favor. I can listen and work through the rough spots with my client. I can have the opportunity to set up a win-win situation. If the client listens and questions but doesn't adopt, I figure that I've had my best shot and he's just not ready, I need to gain more of his confidence.

Sometimes the client wants to use only a part of a program, such as heifer development or BRD control, operations. That's okay. It's a start. We have a small step approach which works pretty well. We try to program from simple beginnings (i.e., how many open cows? how many calf deaths and when, etc.) to more thorough and complex systems (i.e., individual cow records, financial analysis, etc.). We try to bring action and education together for each client. We have found this to have a lasting change and benefit.

Developing the program to fit the client's needs is primary. Without that cornerstone your program is likely to collapse. Secondly, **economic and production rewards are vital steps in the continuing credibility of any program.** Production and economic impact must be used to document the benefit of our presence to the client. Today my methods of documentation are fairly formal. That is, written statements, graphs, etc., but it started several years ago by simply billing service charges separately. That way, when a client thought he was spending too much money on veterinary medicine, it was reasonably easy to collect his bills and show that the biggest portion of his expenses came from vaccine and medicine, not professional fees.

I like to **schedule progress evaluations with clients on a regular basis** once or twice a year and more frequently as the need arises. I consider this to be a part of maintaining the program even if they sometimes don't want to pay for it. People need to be reminded occasionally of goals

and objectives, beginning points and progress. I never take it for granted that my client can see the same things I do. During these sessions, **I review and update goals and objectives with the client.** We plan how we're going to reach our objectives during the time-frame ahead. I also use this time to re-confirm our progress up to that point and especially **re-confirm the economic return to profit that he has enjoyed because of the presence of the production medicine program.**

During the rest of the year, I frequently ask how things are going? Is he satisfied with the program as it is? Are there any complaints? These are sometimes hard questions to ask especially when you think or feel that something is not quite right. I have learned over the years that people sometimes don't communicate their concerns to the person with whom they have the problem. As an Extension veterinarian, I see this every week. I get a call from someone's client. They have a problem and they are calling me instead of their own veterinarian. Even if the problem is beyond the expertise of the veterinarian, he or she should be in there with the client seeking a solution (assuming a leadership role). In my opinion, the call should be coming more often from the veterinarians seeking answers instead of the clients seeking answers.

One of the reasons we come to these meetings is to take something home to our practice and put it to work. It is my sincere hope that today's session will inspire and infuse you to go home and make changes that will make you more vital to your client's operations.

One of the famous secrets to success is to "be ready for opportunity when it comes." Another adjunct here would be to "recognize it when it comes." Getting prepared expands your horizons. There are opportunities all around you but you must open your eyes and mind to them. The harder you work in preparation the more opportunities you will have.

In the movie "The Empire Strikes Back,"²⁴ Luke Skywalker said "I'll try." The wise but ugly Yoda replied, "There is no 'try.' There is only 'do' or 'do not.'" In many ways implementing production medicine is a "do or do not" proposition. If it is for you and your clients then I encourage you to think "do" all the way. "I'll try" thinking will probably fail.