

Making the right culling decisions on the dairy: Helping young veterinarians advocate for their patients and prevent animal suffering

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Abstract

Data indicates that the decision to ship compromised cull cows is too common. Compromised culled dairy cattle continue to arrive at slaughter plants. Leadership within the industry is needed to address this welfare challenge. Dairy cattle veterinarians are uniquely positioned to and responsible for meeting this task. It is supposed by the author that while the next generation of cattle veterinarians are also uniquely qualified to deliver meaningful progress, there is no secret weapon, treatment or single answer that will deliver success; merely one simple ingredient, compassion.

Key words: bovine, animal welfare, culling decisions

Introduction

Professional Duty

As veterinarians our charge is clear. We have all taken an oath to protect and promote public health and food safety and the welfare of animals. Evidence, however, would indicate that, as a profession, we have often chosen our economy over our ethics. The decision, whether passive or active, to look past issues on farm that unequivocally compromise the welfare of cattle, is too common. Justified by economics, efficiencies or simply profit, veterinarians seem to struggle with finding a balance between serving their client and practice and serving their patient. While some may suppose this predicament is unique to food animal veterinarians, it is not. All veterinarians are placed in a uniquely burdensome position of advocating for patients with no autonomy, completely reliant on the will of the caregiver to recognize and offer relief from suffering. The burden may seem greater for new graduates, with the added pressure to ingratiate themselves to new clients and accounts. For this reason, it is essential that as a profession, we support and equip all new graduates with the confidence and tools to advocate for their patient in a way that does not compromise the security of practice.

Business Case

There is a business case to be made for promoting and protecting the welfare of dairy cattle. Although the intention

is to keep all animals healthy, there are times when an animal must be culled, or euthanized when chances of recovery are low, the animal's pain is not manageable, and/or its quality of life has deteriorated. Promoting good welfare, preventing disease, and timeliness of euthanasia are each equally critical components of animal welfare. It is not reasonable to expect that every client shares our values or financial commitment to the patients in our care, nor can we demand that they do so. Nor is it necessary to justify every provision or treatment with a financial equation that proves "providing good welfare pays for itself". The reality is, sometimes it doesn't. The cost of good welfare, however, does not preclude it from making a compelling business case. Activist groups have called out the dairy industry on each of these issues, representing a serious risk to the profession, dairy farmers and the dairy industry as a whole.

Reputational Risk

The use of undercover videos by animal rights activist organizations to expose poor practices on farms and influence the supply chain to make policies regarding animal welfare has become commonplace. Four separate undercover video investigations by animal rights activists in 2017 and again in 2019 are some of the most recent examples of impactful dairy supplier failures on their customer(s). Videos released presented evidence of veal calves, calves raised at a calf ranch or calves raised on a dairy in addition to adult cattle on dairy farms that were not provided timely euthanasia or that were handled inappropriately. In response to the video release, retailers suspended milk pickups from the farms in question, pulling associated brand product off the shelves. The videos also caused some customers to revise their animal welfare audit programs and policy. In addition to the financial loss related to decreased sales, product recall/destruction, and cancelled customer contracts, which are difficult to quantify and not shared publicly, an additional risk in the form of consumer litigation alleging consumer fraud, has emerged as a new and potentially significant financial risk. While the impact of poor performance on the dairy industry is difficult to quantify, it is important for dairy farmers to appreciate that supplier performance in this specific area can negatively impact customers and may result in the immediate cancellation of their contract, leaving them with no market.

What can you do? Train and Track

Factors impacting animal welfare on the farm include caretaker training, availability of protocols, treatment decisions, quality of life assessment, human-animal bond, and economic influences. Cattle veterinarians can develop a culture of care to every farm that promotes making better decisions sooner, while working to improve the success of preventive measures. Culling decisions and euthanasia decisions are interconnected. In the United States, nearly 1/3 of dairy cows are culled from farms annually. Cows culled that are an outcome of involuntary culling decisions, those that are culled as a result of a health issue such as infertility, lameness, mastitis or injury are often compromised and may deteriorate quickly. The reality is that some of these culling decisions should be euthanasia decisions. Not all culled cattle should be sold into the supply chain. If they are suffering and not fit for transport, we should elect to euthanize these animals, rather than sell them. Additionally, we should consider that the euthanasia decision be made even sooner and not be

just a consequence of a culling decision, as this could be too late in regards to the animal's welfare. The opportunity for veterinarians to insert themselves as the chief animal welfare officer on every dairy, taking a leadership role in strategically leveraging conversations to develop a habit of thought in culling decisions that is cow-centric, promoting the welfare of the cow will be essential to the survival of individual clients and the industry at large. To presume there is one way, one conversation, one practice or one protocol to navigate this issue is to underestimate it. The only consistent measure is that each veterinarian must first decide that they are willing and prepared to meet the task to advocate for the cow, above all, and in doing so commit to finding a way to bring each client along as individuals on the journey promoting compassion as a habit of thought, exercising the habit such that over time our and our clients perspectives shift from that of being narrowly focused on the immediate economy of the moment to the broader and lasting economy of our collective actions.