

The Veterinarian's Role In Herd-Health Problems of Contemporary Feedlot Operations

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Veterinary practice in relation to beef cattle feedlot operations has entered a new and rapidly changing era during the past few years. Today it is not at all uncommon for a single feedlot to finish out 30 thousand or more cattle annually and feedlots of 60 thousand capacity are not out of the ordinary. We can expect that such operations will become even larger in the near future. Such mammoth operations may seem startling or even frightening to the veterinary practitioner whose thoughts and concepts are geared toward problems of individual animals and comparatively small herds.

The large animal practitioner being trained in our academic institutions today is inadequately equipped to meet the challenges posed by developments in the present day feedlot industry. A drastic change in the traditional concepts and philosophies which have been perpetuated in the past by large animal practitioners and academic clinicians must occur if the veterinarian is to occupy an appropriate place as an integral part of the herd management team in contemporary feedlot operations.

Our veterinary educational institutions in the past have placed major emphasis on treatment and progress of the individual animal and, to a large extent, have neglected herd-health management and preventive medicine. As a consequence, the large animal practitioner who is called upon for professional advice in modern feedlot operations finds himself unprepared to cope with the daily problems of preventive medicine where such massive concentrations of animals are involved. He must spend years by trial and error methods in order to acquire the level of professional competence necessary to provide appropriate service to the industry. In the meantime, the cattle industry loses unne-

cessary millions of dollars much of which could be prevented by competent veterinary service. As a consequence, the feedlot managers and investors lose confidence in the abilities of the veterinary profession to be an asset in their business enterprise. If our veterinary educators and practitioners fail to recognize this situation in time to apply corrective measures, the veterinarian will soon find himself being replaced by technicians supplied by the feed and livestock industry, as has already occurred in the poultry industry.

"Industrialization" in the form of massive commercial feedlot operations is currently developing in the livestock industry much as it did in the poultry industry a few years ago. We can expect that this trend will continue in a rapidly expanding fashion. Will the training of future potential large animal practitioners in our veterinary colleges be directed and geared toward serving the needs of this changing industry or will the veterinarian's place in these new industrialized management operations be taken over by less qualified individuals? If the veterinary profession doesn't supply adequately trained practitioners for the job, the industry itself will certainly provide a substitute.

The veterinarian, if he is to serve the feedlot industry adequately, must be a member of the management team. He must have more than a mere meager knowledge of nutritional principles, feed processing and feeding management practices as well as have sufficient knowledge to comprehend and appreciate investment principles and economics of bookkeeping systems used in large capital investment operations. With this type of background training, along with a thorough knowledge of preventive medicine practices, he can assume a most important role as

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a part of the management team along with the banker, the nutritionist and the animal scientist in the successful and profitable operation of the commercial feedlot business enterprises.

The veterinarian in feedlot practice must be a specialist. The problems are unique not only because of the massive concentration of animals involved, but also because the population is transient and constantly changing. New cattle introduced into the lot originate from multitudinous sources. The possibility, or even probability, of disease outbreaks is ever present and requires that a system of rigorous and diligent preventive and control measures be continuously operative. Not only the scientific and technical aspects of the preventive and control programs but also the mechanics of their operation must be well organized and programmed so that they operate as a well-oiled piece of machinery. Additionally, these programs and the mechanics of operation must be critically reevaluated periodically from the standpoint of effectiveness, efficiency and cost of operation. It is essential that the disease prevention and control programs be planned as a coordinated team effort between the veterinarian, the feedlot manager and the nutritionist. However, the veterinarian must have authoritative control over the herd-health program, just as the feedlot manager and nutritionist must have authoritative control over their own special areas of competence in the overall feedlot operation.

The veterinary specialist in commercial feedlot practice needs to be not only an astute clinical diagnostician but needs also to be especially well versed in the recognition and interpretation of gross lesions. He must train himself to be an acute observer and to maintain complete objectivity in the thorough exploration of the underlying associated causal factors of herd-health problems. He should establish good liaison with competent pathologists and microbiologists in diagnostic centers so that assistance from such specialists can be readily brought to bear in determining specific etiologic diagnoses. Frequent consultations with other veterinary specialists and with specialists in allied professions such as nutritionists and animal scientists are also essential.

Additionally, a good working relationship should be established and maintained with the lay personnel throughout the feedlot operation. The lay personnel are in close daily contact with the cattle and should be trained to recognize early signs of ill-health among the herd as well as to report management practices which may be sources of problems. They can be the extra eyes, ears and nose of the veterinarian and should be trained by him to serve this purpose. They can also be given responsibility for keeping

records on all problems and possible errors or indiscretions in management of specific pen groups. Selected lay personnel should also be trained as technical assistants in the handling and care of sick animals and in carrying out prescribed routine preventive and therapeutic regimens. The veterinarian, by appropriate training and utilization of lay personnel, can utilize his time more effectively by directing his attention to the more critical problems and over-all herd-health management.

Further aspects of the veterinarian's role in commercial feedlot operations include: 1. Planning of the vaccination program and periodic review of all preventive medicine practices; 2. Setting up and maintenance of appropriate record systems so that origin of disease problems may be traced back to such things as management error, to pen area, to cattle origin or to inadequacy or breakdown in preventive and control measures; and, 3. Regular inspection of all areas in the lot for possible sources or causes of health problems.

In concluding this brief paper, it is again emphasized that the mass production methods being instituted in the feedlot industry today are not unlike those which were successfully instituted in the poultry industry a few years ago. The veterinary profession failed to encourage development of specialized training programs to service the large commercial poultry raising enterprises. Consequently, this segment of the profession has been largely lost and is now serviced by specialized non-veterinary technicians. We are currently seeing developments in the cattle feeding industry which parallel those of the poultry industry. If the veterinary practitioner is to survive as a professional management specialist in this changing field, he must become adequately equipped to do so and, to do this, he needs some form of specialized training covering the various aspects of herd-health management principles which can best be provided in our veterinary colleges. However, it should also be recognized that the veterinary educational institution can only provide certain aspects of the necessary training. The prospective feedlot veterinarian must assume individual responsibility and initiative in preparing himself for this specialized type of practice.

The opportunity is here today for the veterinary profession to perform valuable specialized service to the cattle feeding industry in a manner which will be mutually beneficial to the industry and the profession. Will we, as practitioners and educators, become sufficiently cognizant of our responsibility and provide the necessary specialized training or will we let this segment of veterinary practice slip into less qualified hands?