

Practice Development in the Late 80's and the Veterinarian's Role: Disease Specialist or Health Specialist?

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The role of today's food animal veterinarian is changing and the reasons are many and varied. The biggest single factor for these changes seem to be the influence of the agricultural economy. As the farm crisis of the 80's continues, all sectors involved have had to stop and re-evaluate what they are doing, where they are going and how to cope with the future. The veterinarian in his/her traditional role has always been looked upon as an expert in the diagnosis and treatment of disease entities in a livestock enterprise—a disease specialist. This is how we have been trained in veterinary school, and this is how we are perceived in the eyes of the producers, ag lenders, and others in the agricultural industry. But times are changing, whether we like it or not; just as the livestock producers or farmers have had to change their ways of production—so does the veterinary profession. In order to compete and prosper in a challenging field of today's livestock enterprises, we as food animal veterinarians need to change our image and expand our role. As mentioned earlier, the traditional role of the veterinarian is as a disease specialist. We are called upon to stop the respiratory or scours outbreak in our calves, or treat the acute, toxic mastitis, or surgically correct the displaced abomasum cow, or even assist in the delivery of the breech calf. All this is good and all this is necessary and an essential part of practice, but look at the kind of image we have created. We are associated with loss of productivity from illness and/or death. We are listed on the farm accounting ledger under “costs of production” or “expenses.” We are characterized as a liability, a necessary evil, or an avoidable farming expense. We need to change this negative image from disease and losses, to health and profits.

Many veterinarians today are trying to do just that. They are expanding their traditional role from a disease specialist to a health specialist through herd health programs and practice development. Practice development needs to emphasize profitable, efficient, livestock production through expanded management roles. This is achieved through proper communication, education, and training of producers, ag lenders, ag industry personnel, and veterinarians.

Dr. Kurt Wohlgenuth gave an inspiring and motivational talk to the AABP convention in Kentucky last fall with

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regards to this subject, and I'd like to share and expound on some of these ideas.

In order to change our image and expand our role in herd health and practice development, we, as veterinarians, need to be perceived as health specialists. Those that become successful at this are characterized by their 1) ability, 2) accountability, 3) availability, 4) affability, and 5) an all-business attitude.

Ability, simply means expanding the traditional disease entities of the individual animal into total herd health and preventative programs. It means not only enhancing one's own knowledge through continuing education but also one's clients. The client's education is paramount to a successful herd health practice, for the client must understand the veterinarian's recommendations and must also accept and implement them. Remember, there seems to be a synergistic response, better clients tend to have better veterinarians. Ability also means generating an enthusiasm and optimism about the benefits of the herd health approach.

Accountability, is synonymous with professionalism. The professional of herd health needs to give sound, reliable, unbiased advice and then is accountable for those recommendations. One also needs to document and record this advice and consultation. The professional then monitors the progress of an operation through the routine analysis of these and other records. Finally, the professional herd health specialist needs to get paid for his mind and knowledge, and not his drugs.

Availability and *affability* simply mean looking after number one—the customer, satisfying his needs and anticipating his wants. Remember, the customer is the purpose of our business and not an interruption of our work. This simply means we need to understand that no one does everything correctly. It takes time to build confidence and trust between individuals and to instill the knowledge one can use for a profitable livestock operation. Don't forget the old saying “We are not doing a favor by serving the customer, he is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so. A customer is not someone to argue or match wits with; nobody ever won an argument with a customer.”

An *all-business attitude* simply means that herd health practice is a business. We need to know where we are, where we will go, and how we will get there. We need to sit down with the client and assess the present performance of the herd. Then set forth specific goals or targets of performance

for a specific time frame. And finally, we need to keep relevant records and analyze those records to measure the progress and adjust procedures as needed. The "all-business attitude" implies that the veterinarian takes leadership in all aspects of animal health, that he earns the clients demand for advice and consultation, and is paid for this advice and consultation.

So how can this knowledge be utilized in dairy herd health programs? We can begin by educating our clients that herd health should involve all areas of dairy management; from, 1) records, 2) nutrition, 3) reproduction, 4) mastitis, 5) disease management and youngstock management. We do this by newsletters, client meetings and seminars. We back up our ideas with sound economics from proven research and explain the benefits or profits from good records, balanced rations and proper feeding, lowered calving intervals and SCC, and improved heifer rearing programs.

Producers need to be aware that to achieve efficient profitable production—all areas of herd health need to be evaluated. Just one weak link in our program can prevent us from reaching our target goals.

We as health specialists need to expand each of these areas of dairy herd health. For example: 1) *Records*: DHIA, DairyCHAMP, monthly barn information sheets, DHIA yearly yardstick comparisons, and goals and target sheets. 2) *Nutrition*: take and analyze feed samples, weigh feed, tape cows, body score cows, plot lactation curves, utilize DHIA production records, take water samples, and develop techniques on how when, and what to feed. 3) *Reproduction*: monthly palpation programs, two week palpation programs (Belchner Program), embryo transfer, genetics, and heifer programs. 4) *Mastitis*: individual cultures, bulk tank cultures, somatic cell count records, milking time calls,

equipment evaluation, and treatment records. 5) *Health maintenance*: vaccination programs, internal and external parasite programs, heifer rearing programs, height and weight charts.

In summary—Profitable livestock production and the veterinarian's role. Will this be a challenge or an opportunity? Ask yourself—am I a necessary evil or a partner in profits? Practice development in the future will rely heavily on the expanded role of the veterinarian as a health specialist and not just as a disease specialist. The veterinarian's image needs to be reviewed as a part of profits not losses of the livestock enterprise. Finally, the veterinarian's role as a herd health specialist needs to be looked on as: 1) a leader who is knowledgeable and respected, 2) as a partner who is trusted and reliable, and 3) as a business manager who is profit oriented.

A successful health specialist will be one who can utilize this knowledge of medicine and production and effectively communicate these ideas in such a way that the client understands them, accepts them, and implements them to the fullest extent toward efficient, profitable production.

References

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