

Every Sick Cow Needs a Complete Examination

By Brian Reed DVM, MBA

“Hey Doc, I have a cow not eating this morning. I checked her for a twist, but didn’t hear anything. What do you think is wrong with her?” I’ve had this, or similarly worded phone calls, many times over the years. I usually start this guessing game by engaging my client with some questions about the cow, the extent and findings of the examination that she has been given, and recent events taking place on the farm. If these questions don’t lead to any obvious conclusions, we generally end up at the usual place: this cow needs a complete examination by somebody experienced in doing so. Without a good examination, we are just guessing what is wrong with her. The person giving the examination could be a veterinarian, or it could be an on-farm owner or herdsman with adequate training and experience. Once a proper exam has been administered, the diagnosis and course of action is usually much clearer, although sometimes further diagnostics and problem-solving are in order.

One common lesson taught in Veterinary Colleges is that “you will miss more by not looking than you will by not knowing.” This points to making sure you are doing a complete job of observing and examining everything you can on an animal. This can also include things such as examining records you may have related to this animal, as well as any technology-driven data that may be available on your farm. Once you have all the inputs and observations, you can then make some conclusions about what is going on. If you are worried about the “not knowing” part of the lesson on your farm, work with your veterinarian to develop treatment protocols for the diseases and conditions that you will be treating. Work with them to understand how and when to use the various products and treatments in your arsenal so you will know. This is also a good time to develop good habits for record keeping, so you can look back and determine how your treatment protocols are working for you.

Let’s get back to actually performing a complete, effective and consistent physical examination. Consistency and repetition are keys to success. Consistency is important because it prevents you from missing something. Doing all the same steps in the process in the same way every time, whenever possible, helps you to get a complete picture of what is going on. There is sometimes a tendency to identify an abnormal finding, jump to a conclusion and skip everything else. You can sometimes get by with this, but many animals have more than one thing going wrong with them. This is especially true in the post-partum period, so you can miss something that could be crucial to their recovery if you don’t finish your exam.

Repetition is also important to building up your abilities to do a good job on exams. By doing numerous, complete exams you are building up experience in recognizing normal from abnormal. I find dairy farmers commonly have difficulty in evaluating heart and lung sounds properly, unless they have a lot of training and experience in doing so. I have heard comments such as “I thought she had pneumonia so I listened to her lungs, but I really don’t know what I’m listening for.” The key to solving this lack of confidence is to listen to a lot of normal lung

sounds by doing a complete exam on many animals that don't have pneumonia, so when you do hear sounds of pneumonia, you know what they sound like. That, and having a good stethoscope, helps!

The actual order of how you do your exam is less important than doing it consistently. In general, start by stepping back a little and getting a good overall look at the animal. You are looking for abnormal postures, lameness, swellings, breathing patterns, etc. This is also a good time to evaluate the neck and head areas for dehydration, swellings under the chin or in the brisket areas and her general attitude. I then start on the left side, listening for rumen sounds, "pinging" for a displaced abomasum or other abdominal gas, move up to the chest area to evaluate the heart and lungs, and also feel for enlarged lymph nodes or other swellings. I take a look at the udder as I then move around to the cow's right side and basically repeat a similar exam on that side. Realize the cow's rumen is on her left side, so I am evaluating more of the small and large bowels within her abdomen on her right side. I end up on the back end of the cow and usually take her rectal temperature, consider collecting a urine sample to evaluate ketosis and perform a rectal palpation to evaluate internally. I am also determining the character of the manure if I have not seen any passed during the earlier parts of the examination. When you have finished your examination, you know a whole lot more about your patient than you did when you started.

If you went to your doctor because you weren't feeling well, you would be disappointed if he or she simply treated you the same as their last patient, without even examining you or reviewing your records. That seems ludicrous! Hopefully that would never happen. Make sure you also give the animals under your care the benefit of a complete exam when they're not feeling well. Both your animals and your bottom line will appreciate that.