

Do You Get the Most Out of Your Veterinarian?

By Dr. Charlie Gardner

Recently I had the occasion to review DHIA and financial records with a Pennsylvania dairy producer. I began by noting five key components of herd performance. Those five are:

1. Production in terms of pounds of components per cow per day.
2. Reproduction as measured by pregnancy rate.
3. Udder health with somatic cell count, linear score, and per cent of herd non-infected all reviewed.
4. Youngstock program measured in age at first calving and projected 305 ME production.
5. Forced culling reflected in animals sold before 100 days in milk (excluding those sold for dairy).

This farm was “middle of the road” for most of the parameters, and they were well above average in financial status. One area below average was the pregnancy rate at fourteen percent. The producer was a bit embarrassed by that number, mostly because he was completely unaware that it was that low. As we talked, he shared that about a year ago, he had started having an employee work with the veterinarian on herd check day. Since no one told him differently, he assumed everything was okay.

My own thoughts were along the line of “what a missed opportunity for the producer and veterinarian to engage in a win-win endeavor.” That endeavor is to spend time after each herd check reviewing DHIA and other herd records. This was a key part of the package of services I offered when I was in practice. Many times the record review identified “the weak link” in herd performance. Further investigation usually led to some management change, and follow-up record review revealed if the problem improved.

Records review can go beyond DHIA data. Calf and heifer health, as well as transition cow issues, are not part of DHIA reports but are an important part of herd performance. Besides looking at the numbers, a quick walk by calves, heifers, and dry cows may reveal other opportunities for improvement.

How is it on your farm? Do you invite your veterinarian to be part of your management team? Do you make it clear that you expect to pay for that service? I suspect that some veterinarians are reluctant to go beyond the routine services, because they are not sure how to bill for non-traditional work. I always used the same hourly rate whether I was palpating cows, treating sore feet, vaccinating calves, or doing record reviews. My clients never objected.

Your veterinarian may also be very busy just keeping up with traditional work, or they may not have the expertise to confidently venture into the management aspects of your farm.

Continuing education is available to address the second part of the last sentence, but the first part may be more difficult to solve.

If you have not done so, I encourage you to raise this issue with your veterinarian the next time he or she is at your farm. Make it clear that you would value a deeper involvement from them. Also make it clear that you are willing to pay them. If you get them on board, I think you will both find that you have created a “win-win” scenario. Go for it!