

Animal Care: Take Time to Observe

By Charles E. Gardner, DVM

My wife and I were having dinner with Kay and Pete. We were at a restaurant named T.J. Rafferty's. The waitress brought the menus, and I immediately began looking over the choices. After a minute or two, Pete tapped me on the arm and asked, "Who do you think owns this restaurant?" I looked at Pete for a moment, then looked around the restaurant for an answer. Seeing none, I replied "I don't know, Pete, maybe it belongs to T.J. Rafferty." "No", Pete came back. "That's just the name. Look around the room again."

I did so and still had no clue. "Look at the pictures," said Pete. For the first time, I noticed the pictures, seeing a bunch of football players in each. "What does that have to do with who owns the restaurant?" "Joe Klecko is in every one of them," was the response. "I bet Joe Klecko owns the restaurant." I studied the pictures some more, and Pete was correct. When the waitress came to take our orders, she confirmed that the restaurant was owned by Joe Klecko, a professional football player.

When the food came out, I immediately began to eat. After a few more minutes, Pete tapped me on the arm again. "Look at the busboy." I looked around the room, and finally spied a young man clearing tables. I observed him for a short time, then turned back to Pete. "What about him?" I replied. "That is Joe Klecko's son," Pete said. "What makes you think so?" "Look at that kid, and then look at the pictures of Klecko. That must be his son." It turns out Pete was right again. Joe Klecko had his son bussing tables in his restaurant.

So, what does this story have to do with animal care? Most of us are not as naturally observant as Pete. Certainly not me. For many of us, we need to be very intentional to note all the conditions on a farm. As we walk past animals, we should be making a mental note of them and their environment. At times, we should stop and just look for a minute or two. How are their hair coats? Do we hear any coughing? Are they in proper body condition? Are they clean, dry, and comfortable? Do they have enough feed and enough bunk space? How is the air quality? What about the water supply? How would you feel if another dairy farmer, or a member of the public, were with you?

My partner in practice was once asked to examine a cow in a tie stall barn. She had dropped significantly in milk production and stopped eating. As he examined her, he noted sunken eyes and "tenting" skin. He found nothing else wrong and was a bit puzzled. Then, he saw that her water cup was completely dry. Apparently, the valve had stuck. When the owner offered her a bucket of water, she drank it ravenously. The valve was repaired, and she quickly recovered. If the owner had noticed the water cup earlier, that would obviously have been better.

Finding a problem early can be very beneficial. A springing cow or heifer that is getting up and down a lot, but not going into labor may have a uterine torsion. A quick intervention will usually save both the cow and calf, while a day or two delay can result in the death of both. A cow with

mild lameness will respond much better than one allowed to progress further. Intentional observation will pick up issues a lot sooner than walking by while pre-occupied with other matters.

I have one more suggestion for you. As you pause while moving about the farm to observe animals and conditions, ask yourself about safety. Are there missing shields or electrical covers? Are chemicals properly labeled and stored? Are fire extinguishers readily accessible? Is there a bull who has shown signs of aggressiveness? Are ponds and manure pits fenced? Are your employees properly trained in safety? What do you need to do to avoid potential tragedy?

Most of us are not as naturally observant as Pete. But we will do ourselves, and our animals, good service if we intentionally slow down and take notice of things. Make it a point to do so.