

# BOVINE VETERINARIAN

HEALTH. BUSINESS. WELL-BEING.

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*Dr. Frank Garry, at Colorado State University, encourages practitioners to collaborate with clients to build a service model that benefits the operation's long-term success.*

PHOTO: JOHN MADAY

# The Indispensable Veterinarian

Sustainable practice strategies involve expanding services to help clients adapt and thrive.

BY JOHN MADAY

When a producer knows he or she has an animal-health problem and contacts a veterinarian for help, the conversation and process are fairly straightforward. But in many cases, the most valuable service involves solving problems about which the producer is unaware.

That process might require the veterinarian to learn and practice new skills, including, perhaps most importantly, higher-level communication with the client.

This year's American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) conference followed a theme of "Become



*"Rural practice is not obsolete or outdated, but practitioners need to be willing to change and offer what producers need."*

—Dr. Arn Anderson, Bowie, Texas

Indispensable." Many of the presentations explored ways practitioners can build their business by expanding services and helping clients become more successful.

## BOVINE PRACTICE: WELL POSITIONED FOR THE FUTURE

While the need for change and adaptation remains critical, bovine veterinary practice will continue to thrive. Two veterinarians who recently purchased established practices delivered that message.

One of these, Dr. David Brennan from Ashland, Ohio, purchased his practice from Dr. K. Fred Gingrich, who now serves as executive vice president of AABP. Brennan stresses that the role of rural veterinarians has changed, with more emphasis on consultation services including designing and monitoring protocols, analyzing performance data, evaluating facilities for cattle health and welfare, nutritional services and others, rather than "fire-engine medicine."

Brennan says while some areas are underserved, there is no real shortage of food-animal veterinarians. In order to attract young associates, rural practices need to stay up to date

and provide opportunities for young veterinarians to practice a full range of skills.

Brennan utilized the USDA's Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) to help him get started in rural practice in 2008. After 10 years, he purchased the practice in what he calls a natural progression. The VMLRP, he says, provides a double win, enabling young veterinarians to establish themselves in rural practices where their services are needed while also

benefiting those communities.

Dr. Arn Anderson, a beef practitioner based in Bowie, Texas, purchased several practices in north-central Texas, including one in Graham that was originally established by Dr. Glenn Rogers, who now ranches and remains active in veterinary medicine, including serving as current president at AABP.

Anderson says that "rural practice is not obsolete or outdated, but practitioners need to be willing to change and offer what producers need."

Veterinarians need to help their clients make money, and sometimes, Anderson says, opportunities emerge with services clients do not know they need. Veterinarians, with their medical training and exposure to multiple operations and production systems, often can identify ways to reduce costs or increase returns that the producer might never consider. He stresses a need for communication and client education to help create awareness of those opportunities.

Use newsletters, producer meetings or other avenues to inform clients of industry trends, emerging technologies and, especially, the value your practice can provide beyond traditional clinical services.





## FLYING SOLO

One of the short "Practice Tips" sessions featured Em Mowrer, DVM, outlining how she built a solo practice in southeastern Ohio, an area comprised mainly of small farmers who traditionally only called on a veterinarian when they had an animal-health emergency.

Starting "from scratch," Mowrer says her first steps involved an honest assessment of her own abilities, strengths, weaknesses and professional goals, needs of local producers, services she wanted to provide and what she would need to effectively serve producers in the area.

She quickly recognized a need for education regarding animal-health practices, prevention of disease and production problems. Area farmers were hungry for information, with her first client meeting attracting about 75 producers

Based on her experience, she offered these tips for other young practitioners starting solo practices:

- Be frugal but invest in what you need. While Mowrer concentrates on keeping overhead costs low, she has invested in equipment based on service goals, such as bull-soundness exams, ultrasound equipment, a portable chute and, initially, a well-used truck. "Beware of the shiny-object syndrome," she says. Limit spending to equipment and supplies that will generate revenue for the practice.
- Your practice is a business; run it like one. Farmers like to pinch pennies, but they know the veterinarian needs to make ends meet, so charge appropriately and don't be embarrassed by success.
- Be available, follow up on farm calls and ask about the progress of animals you've treated. Text messaging is an easy and efficient way to



**In launching her solo practice, Dr. Em Mowrer focused on identifying needed services, limiting expenses and building relationships with producers.**

check in regularly. "They don't care how much you know," Mowrer says, "until they know how much you care."

### FOCUS ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS

The traditional model for how bovine veterinarians interact with clients—responding to problems and providing diagnostic services—will not, alone, sustain veterinary practices in the future. Instead, veterinarians need to spend more time addressing clients' big-picture goals, says Colorado State University Extension veterinarian Frank Garry.

Garry says the traditional model of providing routine services falls short, with non-veterinarian technicians

*"We create demand through education."*

—Dr. Frank Garry,  
Colorado State University



increasingly handling those services. Providing worker education, screening for infectious diseases, monitoring outcomes and addressing the impacts of subclinical disease are more likely to help clients minimize health risks, decrease production costs and boost profits.

Also, Garry says the old model assumes the producer knows the need and asks for service.

Many producers might not even recognize the potential for employing additional services that could benefit their businesses. In the 2014 dairy survey from the USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System, producers who were asked how they utilize their veterinarians generally listed treating disease and technical services on top, with employee training and other value-added services falling further down the list.

Veterinarians, Garry says, often could build their practice while helping clients succeed by offering assistance with culling decisions, mortality diagnostics, proactive health monitoring, worker training and education, detailed protocols for vaccine and antibiotic use, investigation of performance or reproduction shortfalls, animal welfare issues and more.

Garry also notes that changes in production practices, adopted for legitimate reasons, can have unintended consequences. Free-stall dairy barns, for example, generate production efficiencies but can have unfavorable consequences on animal health and welfare. The veterinarian can help minimize unintended consequences by determining benchmarks and monitoring metrics as operations adopt new practices.

Workers in large beef and dairy operations have replaced owners and managers as primary animal caregivers, Garry says. Veterinarians, by working closely with crews and providing ongoing education, can keep operations on track toward meeting health and performance goals. "We create demand through education," he says. →

**KEEP CLIENTS ASKING FOR MORE**

Expanding on the theme, long-time Purdue veterinarian Mark Hilton, now with Elanco Animal Health, led a presentation titled "How to Keep Beef Producers Asking for More."

Rather than just perfecting skills learned years ago, driving further and working longer hours to reach new clients, Hilton encourages veterinarians to do more with the clients you have. Often, he says, clients accustomed to limiting their veterinarian contact to emergencies do not realize how more in-depth veterinary consultations could benefit their businesses. "The most important step in developing a new service," Hilton says, "is to offer it."

Hilton suggests arranging a consultation visit that is separate from your clinical visits and assuring the client knows you want to be an asset to the operation. Ask about business goals



*"Keep notes and ask questions that allow you and the client to arrive at solutions together."*

—Dr. Mark Hilton, Elanco Animal Health

and dive deeply into barriers preventing them from achieving those goals. Listen to understand, not to respond. "Keep notes and ask questions that allow you and the client to arrive at solutions together. Consider leading producer study groups, in which you serve as coach and facilitator while clients learn from each other and identify areas where they could benefit from your expertise," he suggests.

**SYSTEMS THINKING IN BOVINE PRACTICE**

Farmers and ranchers develop a natural affinity toward "systems thinking," says John Groves, DVM, with Livestock Vet Services in Eldon, Missouri. They understand that agricultural

production is a complex system, involving interactions between plants, animals, sunlight, soil, water, microbes and many other factors. Systems thinking, as a means of problem solving, involves big-picture consideration of all those factors, instead of linear cause-and-effect thinking.

Veterinarians, Groves says, generally follow a linear thought process based on their training. In a disease-outbreak event, they look at herd history and signs of illness, conduct examinations, determine a differential diagnosis, then a final diagnosis, treat the animals and monitor the results. In a systems approach, the veterinarian still treats the sickness for a short-term solution but also looks further to identify trends, patterns and the forces involved in the disease event.

For example, if high morbidity in stocker cattle relates back to poor preconditioning and weaning practices, linear thinking might suggest paying lower prices for those calves. Systems thinking would involve going back to the cow-calf herds, identifying weaknesses and instituting changes to improve calf health and immunity.

Groves notes, though, that systems tend to resist change, and real leverage points in a system often are displaced in space and time from the "symptoms." Sometimes long-term solutions involve short-term pain, such as a cow-calf producer accepting higher preconditioning costs in hopes of eventually earning higher returns. **BV**



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