

Practitioners Speak Out

By
Doug Young and Ralph Strother*

The agricultural economy of Iowa is undergoing rapid changes. The trend seems to be toward larger economic units and more specialization. The livelihood of the large animal practitioner is dependent on the economics of the agricultural community. Being concerned with the role of the large animal practitioner in the agri-business economy of Iowa, it was decided to send out a questionnaire to various practitioners in the state.

The questions sent out are as follows:

(1) Do you have herd health programs in your practice? Why or why not?

(2) In what areas do you feel a newly graduated veterinarian is most deficient?

(3) In your opinion, what are some of the advantages and disadvantages of a group practice?

(4) The staff of the *ISU Veterinarian* would like to know your opinion of the publication. Is it a helpful publication? How can the *ISU Veterinarian* be improved?

Forty questionnaires were sent out and twenty-three replies were received. The following article is a resumé of the beliefs and ideas supplied by the practitioners.

Question 1

Herd health programs fall into four main categories:¹

(1) Contract Practice—This involves a

signed agreement between the veterinarian and the client.

(2) Programmed Practice—This involves an agreement between the veterinarian and the client as to what services are to be performed. This form allows the veterinarian to arrange his schedule at his discretion and there is no binding contract between the client and the veterinarian. This form is most likely to be the first step beyond the call-type practice.

(3) Herd Health Management—This is similar to the previous two forms but allows more emphasis on preventive medicine and management participation.

(4) Consultation Practice—The veterinarian supplies advice and participates in management decisions.

For the purpose of this discussion, the authors considered any variance from a strictly call-type practice as a modification of a herd health program.

Fifteen of twenty veterinarians in a large animal or mixed practice indicated that they are at the present time or have in the past been engaged in herd health programs. The extent to which these programs are being used varied from one or two on an experimental basis to the point where they made up a large portion of the practice. Most of the veterinarians are in favor of some form of systematic preventive medicine and indicated that these programs enable them to perform a real service to their clients.

The fifteen veterinarians indicated that the herd health programs enable them to

* Mr Young and Mr. Strother are juniors in the College of Veterinary Medicine, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

do a more thorough job. The most emphasized advantage was the development of a closer relationship with the producer which is essential for a successful approach to preventive medicine. Being on the farm on a regular basis allows more control of both the livestock and the management practices. The teamwork approach tends to eliminate the feed store and drug store dispensing business. The programs allow consultation on all aspects of livestock production-nutrition, sanitation, feeding practices, housing of livestock, immunization, etc. One of the most favored aspects of the programs was that the veterinarians are making a profit when the producer profits and not from the farmer's misfortune.

Two veterinarians indicated that the programs were initiated at the request of the client.

Reasons reported for not having herd health programs were: the herds are too small, the veterinarians are too busy with routine work, the programs are too time consuming, the clients do not realize the value of preventive medicine, difficulty in arriving at a proper fee, lack of interest shown by partners, and lack of selling on the part of the veterinarian.

Most of the veterinarians did not favor the contract type due to its binding restrictions and lack of flexibility. The responding veterinarians favored the programmed practice with a few of the more successful programs moving toward the health management type.

Some of the practitioners have modified the programs to temporary consultant herd health programs based on the problems that arise and their severity. Regular visitations are made until adequate health and management are restored. This solves the clients problems without them feeling that there are unnecessary visits and charges.

It was indicated that the herd health program must be adapted to the practice, the client, and the client's problems. When setting up such a program, the veterinarian must respect the client's problems, finances, opinions, and goals. For the program to be successful, it must be evident

to the client that the arrangement is of a benefit to him financially. It must also be realized that this type of practice will not be suited to all livestock producers.

The survey revealed that most practitioners feel that the increased concentration of livestock, the dwindling number of producers, and the requirement for better service will continue and will necessitate modifications of the call-type practice.

Question II

Most of the veterinarians agreed that the recent graduate has an adequate basic knowledge of the science of veterinary medicine. The most noted deficiencies in professional knowledge were a lack of complete knowledge of the normal animal, animal husbandry, public health, and nutrition. The area of livestock nutrition was the most often mentioned due to the increased concentration of livestock per feeding unit, the fine points of agricultural economics, and the too poorly understood nutritional aspects of disease.

The questionnaire indicated that the greatest inadequacy was in the field of economics. This was broken down into areas of both personal and business finances. Areas mentioned were personal financial responsibility, understanding the client's financial problems, responsible business practices, proper fee assessment, bookkeeping, and business law. It was indicated that this deficiency was more noticeable in graduates from Iowa State than in graduates from other veterinary colleges.

As a result of the questionnaires returned, indications are that a series of seminars or a permanent course dealing with the principles of veterinary practice economics would be of value to the students of veterinary medicine at Iowa State.

The second most noted deficient area was practical experience as indicated by the subtopics of practice mechanics, corre-

continued on page 106

Practitioners Speak Out—

continued from page 87

lation of professional knowledge and common sense, adaptation to practice situations, and client relationship. It was stressed greatly that the veterinarian should always conduct himself in a professional and conscientious manner when dealing with clients and when handling animals.

Four methods were frequently mentioned to help alleviate this problem. These were more clinical experience while in school, more association with practitioners while in school, greater development of internship programs, and being associated with an experienced practitioner at least for a period of time following graduation.

Question III

The response to question three was varied and emphasized many of the advantages and disadvantages of a group practice. Generally the advantages seemed to outweigh the disadvantages if the area can economically support a group practice.

Some of the advantages and disadvantages expressed are listed below.

Advantages of a group practice:

- (1) There is a greater chance for pooling and exchange of knowledge and ideas.
- (2) Better equipment.
 - a. Sharing of facilities and equipment which aren't routinely used.
 - b. Purchasing equipment which can be used routinely that is not feasible for a one man practice.
- (3) A group practice allows for the sharing of overhead costs.
- (4) A group practice allows for more specialization and broadening of the financial base of the practice.
- (5) It is much easier to take advantage of opportunities for continued education.
- (6) The members of a group practice should offer better service to their clients

through reduced duplication of efforts and time involved in travel.

(7) The individuals are more able to participate in community activities.

(8) There is more free time for family activities.

Disadvantages of a group practice:

(1) Personality conflicts often develop between the partners and between the wives.

(2) There is some loss of individual freedom.

(3) It is impossible for any one member to have complete knowledge of the practice.

(4) There is a loss of some client-doctor relationship, since the client may not get the veterinarian he prefers.

(5) There is a possibility for lack of team work.

(6) Involvement in too many civic and professional activities may allow for an unequal work load.

(7) The overhead of a group practice will eventually increase.

(8) A group practice doesn't allow equity build-up on real estate property.

The formation of a group practice is strictly a personal and economic decision. The people involved must resolve the problems created and strive to improve the quality of the service they offer, if a group practice is to be a successful enterprise.

Question IV

Responses to question four indicate that the *ISU Veterinarian* is well received by its readers and few suggestions for its improvement were given. However, the staff assures that steps will be taken to adhere to all suggestions as closely as possible.

The staff of the *ISU Veterinarian* would like to take this opportunity to express its gratitude to those completing the questionnaire for their time and assistance in attempting to improve the relationship between the field practitioner and the *ISU Veterinarian*.

REFERENCES

1. Sippel, William L.: Herd Health Management J.A.V.M.A., 155 (1969):1493-1497.