A Needling Problem

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Hypodermic needles are common tools of our livestock farm. Cellophane-wrapped packages of shiny new needles are stored in the basement pantry. Freshly washed and disinfected needles lay beside the kitchen sink. Dirty, broken, discarded needles litter the pickup dash.

Despite early and constant exposure to needles, I always approach them with caution. They are a little bit like bull snakes. I'm not terrified of them, but I respect them.

My life is scarred with a sticky experience my father and I endured when I was a child. Ever since then, I've been wary of needles.

The day stands out sharply in my memory. I couldn't have been more than 8 years old. Dad and I were in the barnyard. He was kneeling on the ground, holding a young calf. I was standing nearby, holding a syringe filled with vaccine, ready to pass the syringe to Dad so he could vaccinate the calf to prevent blackleg.

Suddenly the calf struggled and kicked, as calves will do when they are in the stranglehold of a 180-pound rancher. As the calf lunged, Dad leaned back to keep his balance and hang onto the squirmy bovine.

I was still close by Dad's side. So close in fact that when he moved I promptly vaccinated him above the right ear.

The needle went under the skin, struck his skull and bent.

Dad was livid, as I recall.

That experience should have been enough to convince Dad that I should never hold a syringe again. But one of my jobs at branding time each year was vaccinating the calves. I wasn't big enough for wrasslin' calves, but I was big enough to wield a syringe. I could barely wait for the day when I was strong enough to throw calves, even if it meant getting kicked and run over and exhausted.

Even after I had mastered vaccinating calves, needles still seemed to stick in my craw. Why could I give a chute-full of cows vitamin shots, only to break or bend the needle on the last cow?

Why did that needle, so fine and sharp, seem so large, cumbersome and deadly when I faced the thought of piercing my horse's skin?

Why did Dad have to be gone to the Denver stock show when the milk cow calved? Every year when Lilly calved, she'd get milk fever. That meant administering a slow-drip solution. I just couldn't seem to get the needle in right and get the drip going. Poor Lilly was as punctured as a pin-cushion before she recovered.

Even today, when we have a sick calf, I generally volunteer to do the dirty job of holding the calf so my husband can vaccinate it. "I need the exercise," I'll say.

Needles are a necessary part of our lives because they can be instruments for saving our animals' lives. And they can save our lives, too.

If my Dad grumbles when he reminisces about that needle grazing his skull years ago, I can always say something good came out of the experience. Just like the calves we vaccinated every year, Dad never did get sick from blackleg.

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