

Administering a Mixed Practice

Robert A. Taussig, D.V.M.

FOR MANY years the writer has been acutely aware of the many problems associated with the efficient management of a mixed veterinary practice. The veterinarian whose main interest is small-animal medicine will find that even though he has the opportunity to conduct both a large and small animal practice he will gradually build up the pet practice and let the farm practice go. The reverse holds true, of course, for the veterinarian whose main interest lies in large animal medicine.

Most practicing veterinarians have had first-hand experience with these problems. Circumstances often tend to bring the unwanted type of practice to their door. We all know that the veterinarian in the farm area feels it necessary to care for the occasional pet that his farm client brings to him. Likewise, we know that the small animal practitioner who has his clinic on the fringe of an agricultural area will feel obliged to make occasional farm calls, but these calls are made hurriedly and sandwiched between office calls. It is our opinion that if a veterinarian cannot give good service, he is being unfaithful to his profession and has neither helped himself nor his client.

Dr. Taussig received his D.V.M. from Colorado State University in 1945. His practice is at Sioux City, Iowa.

It is our intention to indicate by first-hand experience how it is possible to combine successfully a large and small animal practice.

We have conducted a practice in Sioux City for 12 years, which has consisted of about equal parts large and small animals. We acknowledge that we have made many mistakes, but believe that by relating our experiences we may be of help to some veterinarians who have the same problems.

Our clinic is a small, compact, 50-kennel unit. It is situated on the outskirts of the city on a well-traveled highway. The farm practice is generally divided between dairy, beef cattle and swine. In the past few years we have been doing some poultry practice.

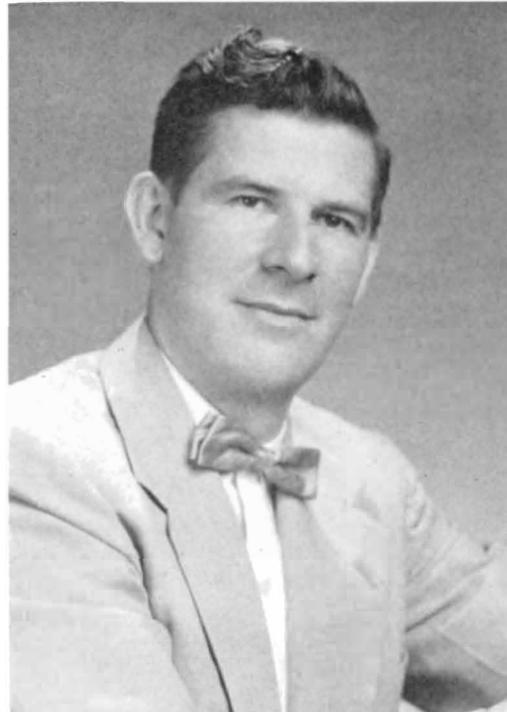
When we began practicing here, agricultural economics were at an all-time high. It did seem best to concentrate on the rural practice. However, because of the availability of the small-animal clinic, we found ourselves overwhelmed with requests for services for pets also. We found it quite a temptation when we came in from a country call, to give service to a waiting small-animal client without cleaning up, then rush out of the clinic again on a farm call feeling that the farm clients just could not wait. This was not the service our small-animal cli-

ents deserved or expected. In time we began to realize that our small-animal clients had a right to expect a type of service they weren't getting from the busy farm practitioner. Therefore, we established regular office hours at the clinic; 11 to 12 in the morning, 3:30 to 6 in the afternoon.

The observant reader, who has had experience in a farm practice, will object to the feasibility of keeping office hours. He will feel that it is impossible to regulate the schedule for farm calls in order to be back in the clinic in time for office hours. When we first started this schedule, we found it quite difficult; and many times completely abandoned the idea. However, we learned to do this by gradually educating our clientele and disciplining ourselves.

A factor that had even greater significance was the proper training of our lay personnel. For example, our office secretary, who also serves in the capacity of surgical nurse, has very specific instructions in answering the telephone. It is her job to not only schedule large animal calls, but also to make appointments for small animal clients. She is instructed to always mention our office hours to our small animal clients. This has resulted in an educated clientele. The hours 11:00 to 12:00 a.m. and 3:30 to 6:00 p.m. have generally provided enough time for most of our clients to be properly served. Naturally there must be exceptions. Our office secretary also, in answering the telephone, tactfully requests the farm clients to call early in the morning when they want service. This has permitted us to make most of our calls between the hours of 7:00 and 11:00. Other farm calls are made after lunch between 1:00 and 3:00. Of course, urgent calls that come in during afternoon office hours must be made after 6:00.

At first we were concerned that our farm clients would object to the hours that service was not available. Yet, as time went on they came to realize that there are very few calls that are so urgent that a couple hours is the difference between life and death.



Dr. Robert A. Taussig

The following examples might illustrate this. Farmer Jones has fifty head of calves to dehorn and wants to start the job at 9:30 a.m. A job like this would ordinarily take the writer several hours. This would make it impossible for us to be back at the clinic for 11:00 office hours, so we tactfully suggest that the job be started earlier. Farmer Jones usually obliges. At another time Farmer Smith calls at 4:00 p.m. and with a note of urgency in his voice requests that we come and treat his cow for milk fever. By careful questioning we ordinarily discover that the cow is not comatose, and that it will be perfectly safe to wait until after the office closes at 6:00. If after this questioning we learn that Farmer Smith's cow is in serious condition and needs immediate help, we of course, leave the office and the office nurse informs the small animal clients that the Dr. had an emergency. This has rarely occurred. The point we make here is that most of the farm calls can be adjusted so that the veterinarian can keep regular office

hours. Also many farm clients have come to appreciate the office hours and know that they can find a veterinarian for consultation at a specific time. In addition to this, farm clients have found it very advantageous to come to the office during office hours to pick up any drugs or other dispensible products. In this way they can have the advice of the veterinarian as to how to properly use the product that they have purchased. We know that this has been a big boost to the dispensing aspect of the practice.

Our day begins in the clinic as we briefly check hospitalized pets. This is done before any farm calls are made. At this time we leave instructions for special feeding or any treatment that can be given by the office nurse. If surgery is to be done, instructions are left as to the proper instruments to be autoclaved. If any laboratory work such as fecal examination, urinalysis, or preparation of culture media is necessary, specific instructions are left. Then we leave for the farm calls. When we return, the kennel man has exercised and fed the dogs and cleaned the kennels. The nurse has dusted and mopped, made out a day sheet of the hospitalized pets, prepared instruments for surgery, done laboratory work, answered the telephone and taken in and dismissed pets. Our office nurse has been thoroughly trained to deal with clients and to administer first-aid measures in the absence of the veterinarian. When the office nurse must admit a small animal in the absence of the veterinarian, she is careful to take a very complete history and write down all the pertinent facts.

Immediately after returning from farm calls and after cleaning up, we acquaint ourselves with the telephone calls that have come in and the messages that have been left. We do this even if small animal clients are waiting in the reception room. If there is time before office hours we do whatever treating and surgery we can. Then at 11:00 we are ready to see clients. Clients and their pets are brought into the examination room by the office nurse. She has made out a

record card and obtained a brief history. If the patient is one we have had in the clinic before, she gets out the old record. While it is of vital importance to work fast in order to get the most clients served in the shortest time, it must be done with no obvious attitude of hurry. Nothing is so dissatisfying to a client as to hurry through an examination and brusquely dismiss them. Speed must be accomplished without sacrificing the good will of the client. The clients themselves realize how busy you are when they see several waiting. They are not as leisurely in their conversation as they would be if the office hours were longer and clients came in one at a time.

After lunch, the farm calls received during the morning can be made or surgery and treating can be done until 3:30 when office hours start again. Our clinic is open and ready at 8:00 in the morning. At no time is it unattended until closing time at 6:00 p.m. We have never felt it necessary to be open on Sundays. In most instances we make ourselves available for any emergencies. We have found the automatic answering and recording telephone device very helpful for use on Sundays and holidays.

We would like to emphasize the importance of the telephone. This instrument can take up a great deal of the time of a busy practitioner, but is vital to his practice. By analyzing telephone calls we have discovered that more than half of them do not really require the veterinarian. Although we are very careful to instruct our office nurse not to give advice or to recommend treatment of any kind, we have discovered that she can answer most questions satisfactorily. When the telephone rings, the office nurse always answers it and if the caller asks to speak to the veterinarian, she automatically asks the caller for his name. She asks, "May I tell him who is calling please?" This usually is sufficient to suggest that the veterinarian is busy and then the caller will tell the office nurse the reason for his call. Often it is to ask the fee for a certain type of surgery or inoculation or some other non-

technical question. If the caller still wants to speak to the veterinarian, the request is complied with unless the veterinarian is busy with a client or in surgery, in which case the office nurse takes the telephone number and informs the caller that his call will be returned later. This is a great advantage because it permits the veterinarian to do all of his telephone calling at one time.

Much stress and strain can be taken from the busiest practice if employees are trained to keep up the record work. We have trained our office girl to do all of the brucellosis and tuberculosis forms. A few hours of instruction has saved hundreds of tedious hours. Our office girl also keeps all accounts and records of the business. She sends statements monthly, and pays all bills after they have been approved.

We think it very important to keep up appearances. Nothing can detract from a successful practice as much as a cluttered, dusty or smelly reception room. The same holds true for the appearances of the lay personnel. We require that anyone who has anything to do with the small animal clients be clean, and preferably dressed in white. We also like to change clothes and put on a white jacket at the beginning of office hours. It is a tremendous job to keep a small animal hospital clean, but the rewards justify the expense and time.

It is obvious that many of the procedures carried out in the administration of a small animal hospital cannot be adhered to when the veterinarian is engaged in a mixed practice. Some shortcuts are necessary; for example, in the spring and fall when the farm practice is at its peak, we find it easy to ambulate many of our small animal patients. This permits us to spend more time in the country. Cases such as otitis externa, summer eczema, and many chronic conditions are sent home with proper medication and instructions to the client. These clients are asked to bring the patient back at stated intervals. Routine surgery, such as spaying, is postponed until the pressure is off in the country. Hospitaliza-

tion is kept at a minimum. Laboratory work, which is routinely done here, is sent to a commercial laboratory to save time.

SUMMARY

Disgruntled veterinarians and dissatisfied clients are often the result of many mixed practices. The extreme contrast between the type of service rendered by a small animal practitioner and a large animal practitioner tends to produce few who do both with any measure of success.

The proper scheduling of time is the first and main requirement. Office hours must be set and carefully adhered to. The veterinarian attempting to do both large and small animal work must discipline himself in order that he does not inadvertently give so much time to one that he does hurried and unsatisfactory work on the other.

Another important objective is the training of lay personnel. This training must result in a better, more complete service to the clientele and a marked reduction in the mass of detail work that is usually done by the veterinarian. Proper use of the telephone by office help is one of the most vital elements in a successful practice.

Some short-cuts in both aspects of the practice can be taken without sacrificing the quality of service.

Proper administration of a mixed practice can result in an efficient and successful business which is an asset to the community and a source of great satisfaction to the practitioner.

A new insect repellent, technical N,N-dimethyltoluamide has been developed by the Orlando Laboratory of Entomology, Research Division of the U.S.D.A. It contains 70-72 per cent of the meta isomer. This product has long-lasting, safe, superior repellency against mosquitoes, chiggers, ticks, fleas, and flies. At present it does not have any proved uses or recommendations for livestock or pets.