

The Yearly Checkup

Veterinarians recommend producers set up quality time each year for a herd health checkup.

by *Chelsea Good*

Many people avoid the doctor's office like the plague, ignoring reminders that it's time for their yearly checkup. When they do finally give in, it's often not for a checkup at the doctor's office but a much-needed hospital visit.

Unfortunately, some producers employ the same only-in-case-of-emergency philosophy when it comes to their cattle doctor. What they don't realize is they may be stepping over dollars to pick up a nickel.

Only in case of emergency

Producers who call a veterinarian only at the tail end of a wreck are making a big mistake, says Larry Hollis, Kansas State University (K-State) Research and Extension beef veterinarian.

"At that time, the veterinarian is just trying to salvage what they can," Hollis says. "It's much better to prevent wrecks from even beginning."

Dale Grotelueschen, a senior veterinarian with the beef cattle veterinary options group at Pfizer Animal Health, agrees, saying that producers who only utilize veterinarians for fire-engine emergencies are missing an opportunity to tap into the professional resources veterinarians have to offer.

Team effort

In order to fully utilize these resources, emergency-only producers will need to shift the way they view their veterinarian, says Dan Grooms, veterinarian and associate professor in the Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences at Michigan State University (MSU). He adds that he sees the role of veterinarians evolving as they take on more consulting responsibilities. Grooms says he thinks this is a great way for veterinarians to put their herd health, food safety and food quality training to use for producers.

However, many producers aren't receiving all the benefits they could be from their veterinarian. Grotelueschen says this may be because there is frequently a misunderstanding between veterinarians and cow-calf operators.

"Many veterinarians are very interested in playing a more integral role in the operation, and cow-calf operators don't always realize this," Grotelueschen says. He calls the veterinarian-producer relationship a team effort, adding that, as with any team, communication is of the utmost importance. He recommends that producers establish an open relationship with their veterinarian, checking in often and utilizing them as a sounding board for new ideas.

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While this constant stream of communication is important, Grotelueschen says it's also crucial to set aside quality time for important discussions. He says that standing outside by a chute isn't the best setting for an in-depth conversation. Instead, all three veterinarians recommend that producers call their veterinarians and set up a time to have a meeting to talk about their operation. Just like with the doctor, this checkup should happen at least once a year.

In order to get the most out of the meeting, the producer and veterinarian should set an agenda ahead of time. That way both parties enter the conversation with a clear idea of what the other person wants to talk about.

The three veterinarians agree that a discussion about the operation's production goals is one conversation that should always be prioritized at this type of meeting. In order to offer recommendations on a total health management plan, veterinarians need to be familiar with where the operation wants to go. It's useful for producers to come to the meeting with these goals in writing. They should also bring production and financial records. This information helps the producer and the veterinarian analyze if the operation is meeting its goals. It's also a good way to identify places for improvement.

"It'll generally be ways to tweak things to improve half a percent here and half a percent there," Hollis says. "But that ends up affecting net profit a great deal."

Another way this type of meeting can improve profits is by providing an opportunity for the veterinarian to introduce new production tools they might not have thought to tell the producer about on a farm visit. Some producers also seek their veterinarian's advice on marketing decisions. There are even veterinarians who provide clients with statistical analyses to help the producers make scientifically sound choices.

Hollis says he thinks scheduling yearly checkup meetings with a veterinarian is a wise investment. By keeping open communication with their veterinarian and setting up a yearly meeting, producers may help prevent an emergency-room experience in their herd and gain unrealized profit potential.

"You may be billed for a couple hours of the veterinarian's time," Hollis says. "But you also may make thousands of dollars in the process."

