

# Veterinary Service - - - Is A Change Needed?

**Raymond Reed**

*The community with one or more busy, successful veterinarians has the healthiest animal population. Yet each year it is becoming harder for new graduates to gain a toe-hold in farm practice.*

Veterinarians who treat livestock diseases are actually decreasing in numbers. In some recent graduating classes as many as nine of ten new veterinarians chose occupations not directly involved with cattle, swine, sheep or poultry health.

There is no indication that the nation is eating less meat, or that the livestock population is declining. Drug company representatives peddling vaccines and antibiotics directly to ranchers and dairy-men have not effectively replaced veterinarians. Progress in controlling animal disease has always required the work of veterinarians along with bacteriologists, chemists, pharmacologists and many other specialists. Why, then, aren't veterinarians acting with more aggressiveness in the field of private livestock health practice?

## Other Fields Greener

The answer is simply that other areas for application of their knowledge and skill have become more attractive. Veterinary educators emphasized the practical aspects of animal medicine up to World War I. When a scientific basis for medical procedures was incorporated in the teaching program, graduate veterinarians began to find a demand for their services in fields outside private practice. These include teaching, research, municipal, state and federal government work in

Dr. Reed is an Animal Pathologist.

sanitation and disease control, service in the armed forces, service with foreign aid organizations and work with chemical and pharmaceutical companies.

Add to this list of employment opportunity the practices dealing with pet animals and light horses, and you see that there is quite a range of choice for the young veterinarian. Any economic distress associated with livestock health practice results in a quick move to greener pastures.

Dr. William A. Hagan, former dean of Cornell Veterinary College and currently director of the National Animal Disease Laboratory at Ames, Iowa, has presented an interesting estimate relating livestock disease costs to veterinary livestock activity. He observed that the 1956 Yearbook of Agriculture's figure for animal disease loss in 1954 (2.42 billion dollars), divided by the number of veterinarians in country practice at that time assigned \$250,000 of the loss to each man.

## There's a Lot at Stake

Granting that full use of all veterinarians then in livestock practice would not have prevented all the loss, he offered a shocker by calculating that preventing half the loss would have meant a saving to the industry of \$1.5 billion, or \$120,000 per veterinarian.

Six years have elapsed since the information was gathered on which the above illustration was based. The situation has deteriorated in the meantime. Certain progress in disease control has only had the effect of preventing catastrophe.

What suggestions do we have for improving this threatening trend? Certainly, no livestock owner will volunteer

to create more attractive financial circumstances for veterinarians, yet we see that the veterinarians yield to income pressures. All service type business exists because it can "get its hand in someone's pocket." Presumably the service and the need for it justifies the charge. Do we quibble about calling for help if the feed mill or milking machine breaks?

## Preventive Medicine for Livestock

The solution where protection of animal health is concerned lies in proper use of veterinary service. If the milk bottle has replaced the family cow, and the multi-hundred head dairy the small unit, then perhaps fewer veterinarians are needed in livestock practice, provided the knowledge of those that remain is properly applied, and provided that staying in livestock practice pays off for those few. Where the units concerned with providing animal products have lessened in numbers but increased in size, disease prevention becomes far more important than disease treatment. This means the veterinarian must be consulted before the animal or animals are sick. It also means that fees must be charged for planning and advice, phases of veterinary activity formerly given free when services of diagnosis and treatment were performed.

Two methods of arranging for this type of service are developing—the service contract between veterinarian and livestock owner, and outright employment of a veterinarian by the owner. Prospects for the success of this new approach are good, but would be better if owners were more aware of the advantages of either arrangement. It would be better still if more veterinarians were oriented to this approach, rather than answering frantic calls after trouble develops.

Veterinarians receive training in college that prepares them for disease prevention work, but only a few have had opportunity to apply the knowledge, which almost always requires a selling job. Perhaps livestock owners who appreciate the prospect for improvement should do a little selling in reverse.

To some extent it is possible to teach an old dog new tricks, so it shouldn't always be necessary to seek new graduates for herd supervision, although among this group should be found veterinarians capable of developing effective methods. Drug, call and treatment costs won't disappear. Total outlay for herd health will probably remain a painful figure to face, but it should be expected that net return would increase as a result of good planning.

