

THE FUTURE OF LARGE ANIMAL PRACTICE IN ALBERTA*

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INTRODUCTION

THE ABILITY to see into the future is a right reserved for dreamers and horse players. Attempting to plan for the future on the basis of past experiences, trends, and factual data available, is a necessity in today's rapidly changing world. I have personal reservations, however, on the extent to which planning, in the broadest sense, is becoming the "science of the day." It is not as infallible as some would have us believe.

My involvement in veterinary medicine in Alberta over the last nineteen years has been with total livestock populations rather than with individual practices. Government responsibilities could not be met, nor can I see how they will ever be met, without some type of practitioner working in the field. It is impossible to eliminate from my judgments, personal views and opinions that arise from continued contacts with both practitioners and their clients. I suspect that many practitioners would be surprised by the esteem in which they are held by their clients, and I am convinced that the large animal practitioner has contributed more to the public recognition of the profession than any other group. Despite the opinions of many non-practising experts, he is not going to disappear from the scene.

INFORMATION AND OPINIONS

Some abbreviated statistics which illustrate not only the growth relationship between livestock populations and veterinary practitioners, but also provide some substance on which to formulate views of the future are presented in Table I (1).

Poultry and horses have been omitted,

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avian medicine will continue as a restricted specialty only. Equine practice will probably expand. I envision it too as a specialty, dealing as it does with Thoroughbreds, standardbreds and riding horses. Equine practice is not concerned with food producing animals which is the concern of this panel.

Swine populations have remained relatively constant within a surprisingly narrow range. Despite the large numbers of swine, information gathered from disease statistic reports of the Alberta Department of Agriculture indicates that swine practice represents only 10 to 15% of professional service calls. The change in population, from the three or more sows per farm to the large breeding or feeder units of today may, however, make a difference.

Dairy cattle have followed a gradual downward trend which may reverse slightly with increasing human populations. Veterinary practitioners will always be needed in existing milk sheds.

The number of beef cattle will continue to increase and this is the area that presents the greatest challenge. The role of the veterinary practitioner in the cow-calf or feedlot enterprise has not yet been clearly defined. The major veterinary problems of today are calf production, calf survival, pasture diseases, and performance in feedlots.

It is an absolute dictum that farm practice, in terms of money, is tied to the economics of the industry it serves. The dollar spent on veterinary medicine either must return a dollar plus, or prevent additional loss. All economic surveys and cost studies show veterinary medicine as a cost item only. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics figures on farm costs in Canada for the period 1960-64 have veterinary medicine, including drugs, buried in a category described as "Pesticide, Livestock Purchase, Veterinary, etc." that accounted for 8% of 2.1 billion dollars (4). It is anomalous to discuss the future of large animal practice for an industry that had gross earnings in excess of \$400,000,000 in 1966. The crux of the matter is that not

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TABLE I
FARM CASH INCOME FROM LIVESTOCK AND LIVESTOCK PRODUCTS—PROVINCE OF ALBERTA, CANADA

Year	Populations	Cash Income	Number of large animal practices	Number of large animal practitioners
1946	Cattle (1) 1,768,100	—	19	23
	Swine 1,250,602			
1951	Cattle (1) 1,482,000	—	31	40
	Swine 950,000			
1956	Cattle (1) 2,400,000	\$221,000,000	45	57
	Swine 1,571,929			
1961	Cattle 2,778,000	\$280,243,000	60	81
	Beef 2,369,000			
	Dairy (1) 528,000			
	Swine 1,659,909			
1966	Cattle 3,119,000	\$406,762,000 (estimated)	74	132
	Beef 2,669,000			
	Dairy (1) 450,000			
	Swine 1,462,500			

*Data supplied by Economics Division, Statistics Branch, Alberta Department of Agriculture.
(1) Swine marketed.

nearly enough money is expended on true veterinary medicine.

One or two brief examples of the need for practitioners are presented. An Extension Branch report of a farm business analysis of 50 farms in a mixed farming district for the year 1961 lists 652 animal deaths at a market value of \$19,519. Under today's demands for peak efficiency which is necessary to offset rising production costs, losses from death are not nearly as significant as is impaired performance. The 1966 District Agriculturists' Annual Report contains the following statement, "Economic losses from malnutrition and disease are staggering."

Statistics contained in the 1965 Alberta Cow-Calf Enterprise Survey, published by the Alberta Department of Agriculture, support this statement (3). The report was based on cost studies and analysis of 94 cow-calf operations. Calf production on individual farms ranged from 60% to a reported 100% and weaning weights ranged from 350 pounds to 520 pounds. The cash value of a pound of weaned calf in 1966 was in excess of 25 cents. When these figures are applied to 1,000,000 or more beef cows, "staggering" amounts are soon reached. This report does give recognition to the value of veterinary medicine in helping to improve production. Unfortunately there will be little outside help in getting the veterinarian into the niche that he must fill.

How can good veterinary medicine and the industry that needs it for efficient production be brought together?

THE FUTURE

"A Livestock Program for Alberta" released by the Alberta Department of Agriculture in October 1965, summarizes the attitude of government to veterinary practice (2). Expansion of inspection services and health programs included in this report are predicated on the availability of practitioners.

A smaller percentage of graduates will enter large animal practice. There may be

difficulty in filling the need as established generations retire and younger people choose the better hours of salaried positions or the challenges presented by the many scientific fields opening to them.

Human nature, being what it is, I cannot see how the personal veterinary-client relationship can ever disappear. Emergencies will continue to arise. Someone has to calve the cows!

Contract practice, in the strictest sense, is nothing more than a transitional tool.

The large animal practitioner of the future will be fully professional, engaged in program planning, consultations, and meeting emergency situations. His practice will be based on a trustful relationship with his clients and his income will be derived almost entirely from professional services.

Success and competency in clinical and preventative medicine will be even more closely associated than they are at the present time.

I am completely optimistic about the future of veterinary medicine. To be otherwise would be to believe that the developed field of animal health products and prophylactic mass medication will reduce the need for veterinarians in the field.

This is not to imply that practice, as it is known today, will not have to change to fill its rightful role.

REFERENCES

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3. 1965 ALBERTA COW-CALF ENTERPRISE ANALYSIS—PUBLICATION No. 816-4202-2. Alberta Department of Agriculture, Edmonton, Alberta.
4. SUDERMAN, DAVID. The Cost Picture. *Family Herald and Weekly Star*. Jan. 6, 1966.