Food for thought for food animal veterinarians

Basic ingredients for a good food animal practitioner

Most of my professional life has been spent with food animal practitioners, and I have met thousands of these people. I have worked and visited with hundreds in their clinics and practice areas. Recently, a group of food animal practitioners as discussing the current status and future of meat animal practice. They wondered what type of students need to be selected for our colleges of veterinary medicine, students that soon will be servicing the fast-changing food animal production units. This group asked me what qualifications or attributes were possessed by successful practitioners. Thus, with input from practitioners themselves and with insights from my own observations, I submit those qualities that I believe characterize good food animal practitioners.

Desire — Successful veterinarians want to work with animals and people, to guide and assist animal producers to produce healthy animals in a desirable environment. This desire is usually manifested when the veterinarian is a young person, but intensifies with training and years of practice. They create opportunities. They don’t worry about money or income; they work to provide the income they need, and they live within their income. They love animals and want to aid them to be healthy and comfortable.

They Know How to Communicate — Food animal practitioners that are considered successful know how to convey their thoughts and observations to animal owners. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind as to what the veterinarian is trying to do. They are firm, yet pleasant and convincing to people of all segments of the industry that service animal producers. They don’t assume the language and expressions of those they serve. They maintain a truly professional stance in all types of conversations.

They Assume a Lifetime of Learning — Too frequently, the institutions of education are blamed for the inadequacies of veterinarians. This is not correct, in that once a person pursues a career in veterinary medicine, they actively must engage themselves to keep informed, to be a leader, to know the trends in all facets of animal production, not just veterinary medicine. What they thought and did when they graduated is subject to change for those in practices that keep up with rapidly changing animal production. Successful food animal practitioners are actively involved in every continuing education endeavor offered that pertains to them and their practice activities. They attend, they listen, and they ask questions. One middle-aged practitioner told me, “I always want to know as much or more than my clients, because I want to help them. I have practiced preventive medicine since the day I graduated.”

They Stay Professional — Too frequently, food animal practitioners believe that because they are associated with animals and animal facilities, they need not dress professionally nor maintain their personal appearance as that of a professional. No, neckties are not needed, but coveralls and boots worn on the farms should not be worn in the coffee shop, bank, or clinic. Respect is earned from clients by the behavior and demeanor of the professional. This includes how veterinarians are held in respect by others — including fellow veterinarians that serve the livestock industry.

Adherence to Rules and Regulations — There is nothing that labels a veterinarian more than failing to adhere to government regulations, accepted professional standards, and the true code of being a professional. Irresponsible compounding of drugs, using inappropriate drugs, misusing biologicals, falsifying health papers and records, administering drugs and performing procedures not necessary for the health of the animals, and many other such deviations from “normal, accepted practices” will soon mark a veterinarian. Confidence and respect are quickly lost by those associated with the veterinarian. Successful practitioners don’t allow themselves to be involved in such endeavors. A successful veterinarian is an ethical person. Ethics are not just learned during pursuit of an education, but are ingrained in the individual from the time they are children.

Economic Stability — Unfortunately, success too often is measured by the economic stability of
those in question. However, a person that can't handle their own economic status cannot very well assist others, particularly clients wanting preventive medicine programs. Veterinarians that are "slow payers," that are on the COD list of their animal health suppliers, and whose credit ratings are never the best, are soon known. Livestock producers will not trust or put the fate of their livelihood in the hands of such veterinarians.

Living beyond their means also establishes poor credibility. Close adherence to financial matters does provide economic stability to veterinarians. A review of successful veterinarians reveals that, invariably, they are successful in business.

A successful veterinarian is a good citizen — What is a good citizen? There are many definitions, and no one is going to set a standard for the moral and civic qualifications of a veterinarian. Certainly, many successful people are involved in church and civic affairs. They desire to serve society. Further, they usually are involved deeply with their profession. The veterinarian that has extra-marital affairs, chisels on income tax, lets other family members go to church alone, and is always complaining about the city council, school board, and state and national politicians really isn't a good citizen.

Successful veterinarians are usually happy — There are many other qualifications one could cite, but I think the one foremost in my mind is that successful veterinarians are usually happy and are loved by many. What more can be said about a successful person, regardless of their chosen profession?

Now the crunch! How can veterinary colleges select students, male or female, that eventually will be successful veterinarians? A student may have good grades and have high moral standards, yet no one can predict their future performance. Fortunately, most students that desire to become veterinarians and spend 7 to 10 years and thousands of dollars on their education want to be successful. There are those that never will fit this mold. A veterinarian who had been a practitioner for 30 years commented, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." He meant that students must possess the basic ingredients to be successful before they graduate, and that they can't acquire all of the attributes necessary to be successful after they graduate. Or can they?

Fortunately, most veterinarians that I know have the necessary qualities. Somebody is doing a good job!