

How to make money in food animal practice plus stuff they might not have taught you in school

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Abstract

On the day that you graduate from veterinary school, you have the greatest amount of knowledge that you will ever have. However, you are not the best veterinarian that you will ever be on the day that you graduate. As you progress through your practice career, you will gain wisdom. Wisdom is gained through experience, but only if you pay attention and learn from your mistakes. You may not be the best veterinarian that you ever were on the day that you retire due to your knowledge both being lost over time and becoming outdated. However, you can always be improving as a veterinarian through continuing education, learning from clients, peers, and experience, and most importantly: curiosity. "*Semper curiosus!*"

Key words: practice profitability, practice tips

Résumé

La journée où vous obtenez votre diplôme d'une école vétérinaire, vous possédez les plus grandes connaissances que vous n'allez jamais avoir. Toutefois, vous n'êtes pas le meilleur vétérinaire que vous allez devenir lorsque vous recevez votre diplôme. Vous acquérez la sagesse en progressant dans votre carrière en pratique. La sagesse s'acquiert avec l'expérience mais seulement si vous faites attention et apprenez de vos erreurs. Vous ne serez peut-être pas le meilleur vétérinaire que vous avez déjà été à votre retraite car vous allez perdre certaines connaissances ou celles-ci deviendront dépassées. Toutefois, vous pouvez toujours vous améliorer en tant que vétérinaire avec la formation continue, en apprenant de vos clients, de vos collègues et de vos expériences et surtout en étant curieux. "*Semper curiosus!*"

Practice Profitability

Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't make money doing large animal veterinary work. However, the opportunity cost of time on the road is the greatest impediment to large animal ambulatory practice profitability. Therefore, you must either practice in an area of high patient density or charge an adequate hourly rate to compensate you for your time on the road.

Regarding your charges, remember that you must put more milk in the bulk tank than you take out (in terms of dol-

lars). If you take more milk (\$) out of the bulk tank than you put in, then you are nothing but a parasite. In that case, it is a correct business decision on the part of the dairy owner to hire a different veterinarian. After every farm call, you should ask yourself if you made the client money.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis is our main "product" as veterinarians. That is what we sell. In most cases, if the diagnosis is correct, the treatment is both obvious and simple. Diagnosis is a 2-step process. Veterinarians tend to focus upon step 2 – that is: "From the information that we have, formulating the diagnosis". When I have made a diagnostic error in my career, I have almost never made a mistake in step 2... the mistake was almost always in step 1. Step 1 is simply: "Gather in all of the available information before proceeding to step 2!" You'll miss the lymphoma if you don't palpate the lymph nodes.

Recommended resources:

- Read some Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Holmes never solves the crime because he, using the same information as the police, reached a different conclusion. Holmes always solves the crime because he went into step 2 with information that he noticed but the police did not.
- Go to the BCI website via the AABP website and listen to "Addressing Diagnostic Error" by Mark Graber delivered at the AABP meeting in Omaha in 2017.

The Exam of Life is Cumulative

The more chemistry, physics, mathematics, epidemiology, and statistics that you remember and use, the better veterinarian you will be. You are not a good food animal veterinarian if you do not use math, epidemiology, and statistics every day. If you use these skills every day, they will become very sharp tools in your toolbox. If you do not use these skills, they will atrophy and die.

Midla's Advice Regarding Building Your Practice

- You tend to like to do what you do well.
- You tend to do well what you like to do.
- Don't listen to ANYONE (including me) trying to tell you what the future of bovine veterinary practice will be like – make it whatever you want.

Note that you might have to be flexible with respect to geography to find a place where you can make money doing what you like to do.

- You get what you build.
- If a client calls at 3 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon asking you to come out and castrate 3 calves and you go out and do it, then you are teaching your clients that that is something they can expect you to do. If your fees are the lowest in the area, then don't expect to have clients willing to spend money on diagnostic testing to properly work up a case. The point is that you should do things the way that you think they should be done from the beginning. You will then attract and keep clients who appreciate your style of practice.

Following rules 1 and 2 will lead to practice satisfaction and practice success.

The Disease Triangle

The importance of the disease triangle (host – environment – pathogen), in my opinion, cannot be over-emphasized. Veterinarians tend to focus too much upon pathogens. The real underlying problem in most cases involves the host (e.g. did not receive adequate colostrum) or the environment/management (e.g. weaned, castrated, dehorned, sent to the sale barn all on the same day). There are a myriad of examples, but a great one is the "Sand Hills Calving System".

Midla's 3 Rules for Hitting a Vein Applies to all Species

1. Excellent patient restraint:
Who is more important when trying to hit the jugular on a cat – the person restraining the cat or the person trying to hit the vein? Clearly the answer is the person restraining the cat. If the cow/steer/sheep/pig/etc. is not adequately restrained, then do not try to hit the vein until it is.
2. Completely occlude the vein:
If you can't see the cephalic vein on the hit-by-car dog with the technician holding it off, then apply a tourniquet.
3. Patience!
Wait for the vein to fill so that you can clearly see it before trying to hit it.

If you follow these rules, the vein will always stand up and you will always hit it. I realize that these seem obvious. However, when you get frustrated trying to hit a vein, step back, take a moment, remember these rules, implement them, and start over again.

Calf Catheterization

Always do a "cut down". The pressure required to get through bovine skin flattens the vein.

Remember, they use bovine hide for the soles of shoes for a reason – it is very tough stuff. In the case of any extremely dehydrated animal, use gravity. Place the part of the animal where the vein is located that you are trying to hit below the rest of the animal. Gravity will result in a distended/easy to hit vein.

Chest Pocket Cell Phone Flap

The chest pocket is best because the phone is least likely to become damaged here and you can answer it with either hand. However, when you bend over the phone will fall out. The most likely time for it to fall out is when you are washing your hands in a bucket – and it inevitably falls into the bucket. When you get new coveralls, sew a flap with a snap over the pocket (or take it to a local seamstress – usually costs just a few dollars).

Breakaway Cord for Vet Box

Construct a cord that is only 2 feet long with a standard male end and a female end with a plug to fit your vet box. The main reason is so that the cord will come unplugged at the male end when you accidentally drive away with the unit still plugged in (and you will do this). A side benefit is that you can throw this cord into your truck and take it with you so that you can plug your vet box in anywhere.

Notes:

1. Use a heavy duty cord – the funky 20-amp female plug is on there for a reason: the unit draws a lot of current.
2. Plug and unplug the male end periodically to be sure that it functions smoothly so that it will come unplugged when it is supposed to do so.

Boots and Boot Drying

I strongly recommend that you wear work shoes with rubber over-boots rather than rubber "Wellingtons"/Muck style boots etc. Shoes are better for your feet/knees/back/posture/health. When you get things like manure and fetal fluids in your rubber over-boots and must hose them out, they can be stored inverted in the space between the truck cab and the truck bed between calls. Unless it is really pouring rain, and even most times when it is, they will be dry inside before you reach the next stop.

Dystocia Tips

Everyone has their favorite tips and methods for relieving dystocia. Below are just a couple that you might not hear elsewhere.

- How to determine, unequivocally, whether the foot in your hand is a front foot or a back foot: Note that the "elbow" (humerus-radius/ulna joint) and the

hock are almost indistinguishable when the calf is still inside of the cow. However, as you move distally on the forelimb, you run into a carpus before you get to the dewclaws. There is no such joint on hindlimb between the hock and the dewclaws.

- For a retained limb, actively move the proximal part of the limb laterally and the distal part of the limb medially. You will wind up doing this passively, but doing it actively greatly facilitates limb retrieval. This works on both front and hind limbs. Try it on yourself – limbs bend this way naturally quite easily.

The Oscillating Pendulum Cow

When there is a single cow to be palpated in a row of headlocks without any cows on either side of her, sometimes she begins to swing her hind end back and forth, making it difficult to palpate her and also putting your shoulder at risk of injury. Keeping her attention with your non-palpating hand can often fix this problem.

Ammo Boxes and Milk Crates

The problem with nearly all toolboxes that you buy from the hardware store is that their shape makes it such that they take up more space on the exterior than they hold on the interior. Used ammunition boxes (available on-line) make great cases for catheterization supplies, foot blocking supplies, etc. Milk crates can hold halters, ropes, etc. Ammo boxes and milk crates have the advantage of not taking up any extra space in your truck.

Easy Bull Ring Insertion

Use the bloat trocar (with the cannula on it) to make the hole. Place the point of the bull ring in the cannula and easily feed the bull ring back through the nose.

Rules for Tying and Releasing a Cow that is Trying to Kill You

- Know where you are going to tie her BEFORE you get the halter on.
- Do NOT tie an animal to a lone support post in the center of a barn.

- Tying the cow to a post on the wall = 180° swing; tying the cow to a post in the corner = 90° swing.
- Going around the post twice with the rope makes the knot less likely to cinch too tightly to be released.
- If you think you know how to tie a quick release knot, think again. Learn how to tie a true quick release knot.
- To release a cow that is pulling hard on the halter:
 - Tie a second rope to the halter.
 - Tie the second rope to the post.
 - Untie the halter – the second rope will pull the halter off of the cow.

Fluid Therapy

Stop memorizing formulas. With the following 6 tools, any fluid therapy question can be answered:

- 1 liter = 1 kilogram
- Extra-cellular fluid space = approximately 1/3 body weight (a bit higher in neonates).
- 6 – 9 – 12 rule of dehydration (<6% is difficult to detect clinically; >12% is near death)
- 5 – 10 – 15 rule of bicarbonate deficit (5 – 10 – 15 correlates to mild – moderate – severe)
- 1 to 2 ml/lb/hour is the approximate maintenance fluid requirement.
- Periodic table of the elements

Necropsy Philosophy

My necropsy philosophy is based upon:

- A diagnostic test is only valuable insofar as it potentially alters the intervention.
- Common diseases occur commonly.
- Necropsy is an underutilized tool on most cattle operations with the exception of feedlots.

In most cases (not all but at least many) instead of doing a “complete” necropsy (expensive due to time and lab fees) which leads to never being called back to do another one, do a 10-minute “quickie”. Your diagnostic power to detect pathology (which you can actually make management changes to prevent) will ultimately be greater by having a greater sample size.