

# Skills for success in dairy and mixed animal practice

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## Abstract

The success of veterinarians in dairy practice and mixed animal practice will depend on the initiative of the individual veterinarian to adapt to the ever-changing industry. Technical skills of rectal palpation and displaced abomasum corrective surgery are the mainstays of dairy medicine. Further growth and skills come from engaging the practitioner's goals and matching them to the producer's goals for their operation or animal species. Physical and emotional health are imperative to the success of a dairy or mixed animal veterinarian. Skills are refined through practice and can be challenged with new goals and education.

**Key words:** success, skills, dairy, mixed animal

## Introduction

The modern-day veterinarian will be challenged differently than ever before from clientele, societal pressures and a changing veterinary industry. The success of veterinarians in dairy practice and mixed animal practice will depend on the initiative of the individual veterinarian to adapt to the ever-changing industry. Specific skills are necessary for dairy veterinarians to succeed in serving the dairy industry, but most skills can be useful in mixed animal practice. The dairy veterinarian of the modern era is one who is proficient in technical skills. Technical veterinary skills are immediately useful, but other skills in communication, emotional review and self-learning will allow professional growth.

## Technical skills

Manual rectal palpation is still a large portion of a dairy veterinarian's daily routine, despite newer methods of reproductive diagnosis. Manual rectal palpation combined with reproductive ultrasound diagnostics allows dairy producers to identify cow-side data (pregnant, open, cystic, anestrous, etc.) without a delay in diagnostic results. A successful dairy veterinarian is proficient in both manual palpation and palpation with ultrasound to best fit an individual herd's needs.

A large portion of dairy veterinarians traditionally in the past 50 years also included displaced abomasum (DA) corrective surgery. There are various techniques to fix a DA, and a successful veterinarian will find the technique that fits their surgical comfort. The dairy industry has made tremendous strides in lowering DA rates of occurrence, but practitioners still need to know this common surgery. The DA corrective surgery is also a gateway to improving overall surgical skills. After many DA surgeries, the veterinarian becomes comfortable with surgery of any situation in a bovine animal.

After the first two skills are accomplished, a successful dairy veterinarian should be a master of communication. Many veterinary students have didactic and laboratory style communication classes; however, this is not always beneficial for working with dairy producers, or even clients owning any species of

animal. Due to the variability in people, there should be multiple approaches to communication to clients. Dairy producers vary from irritable, coarse and grouchy, to understanding, challenging and agreeable. Reading clues from clients outside of written communication – including non-verbal communication and clues from coworkers or employees – will help the practitioner judge whether the information was presented effectively.

Modern-day dairy producers are also short on time, just like most working professionals. Communication should match the needs of the aspect of the conversation. For example, texting may be appropriate for telling a producer that the veterinarian will arrive at the farm in 30 minutes for a DA surgery; while a phone or in-person conversation would be better suited for situations like discussing disease outbreak or consulting records analysis.

Other technical skills relate to the general practice of veterinary medicine. Skills such as diagnosing and treating diseases commonly seen in dairy animals or the species commonly seen. For example, a dairy veterinarian should know the way to diagnose all the major production diseases associated with dairy animals from birth to the lactating animal. However, skills needed to expand upon diagnosis include sampling, laboratory selection, sample submission, packaging samples and more. Treatments should be first and foremost effective or relatively understood as effective. Treatments should also not be outweighed by the producer's opinion or the veterinarian's lack of trying something new. Scientific basis for treatments should always be the focus of the veterinarian, but on-farm trials can be effective in determining worthiness to those treatments with perceived notions.

A final technical skill for dairy or mixed animal veterinarians is to work up a problem on-farm. There are a variety of problems to work through in any given day. Traditional veterinary medicine education teaches how to solve problems in a unique way that enhance the value of the veterinarian to the client. Working up a case for a dairy herd with severe diarrhea or an increased death rate in the fresh pen could be valuable for the client from a revenue standpoint, but also for the veterinarian to the producer as a means of increasing rapport and trust. Any situation, no matter how small, should be consulted about with the producer or the specific people who are affected by the problem. Do not leave any person out of communication to avoid overlap, but also to ensure that everyone is working together for a common goal.

## Social and emotional skills

Dairy and mixed animal veterinarians are not immune to social and emotional challenges. The ever-increasing rate of suicide among the professionals in veterinary medicine is staggering. Society in general has a much more negative outlook on life, however, every veterinarian should focus on having a reminder for the positive attributes that veterinary medicine brings to one's life.

Advice from other veterinarians in dairy and mixed animal medicine can be a life-saving moment for clinicians. Failure is an event, not an adjective or a characteristic. A case can be a failure; however, a person cannot be a failure.<sup>3</sup> Skills in professional growth can occur from various communications between clients, coworkers and bosses. Feedback is not always easy to hear, especially when it reiterates a negative occurrence or attribute of one's abilities, however, these are necessary to hear for personal growth. Improving and adjusting one's personal working routine can alter rates of success in patients, rates of success with clients and overall professional success and productivity.

Use the failures to improve upon skills, communication or organization of life, family, friends, hobbies and professional development (such as continuing education or further educational degrees). Set goals and work with one's employer to reach those goals.<sup>3</sup> Goals can direct the practitioner to successful ways of practically meeting the overall goal, which is a success. For example, if a veterinarian wanted to implement calf lung ultrasound, one might first set a goal of finding how many calves the current practice could potentially ultrasound. A next step might be how many calves would actually get an ultrasound versus the total that are in the clientele. A further goal might be creating a strategy for a specific farm for implementing ultrasound, then extending the goal to more producers. All goals should have an end time to complete. These goals would be discussed with an employer or producer or both, depending on the situation.

A similar skill for dairy and mixed animal veterinarians is to work toward the client's goals, not the personal goals of the veterinarian. If a client wants to milk 75 pounds per cow per day of milk, but the clinician wants to push for 95 pounds per cow per day of milk, the situation will never end well until they are both in agreement. Most clients will not be motivated to work toward goals that are far beyond their own goals. There are some clients who always want to improve, but every goal should be discussed with the producer, herd manager and team to agree before implementing change.

Take time to reflect, decompress and unwind. There are personal strategies for relieving work-related frustration and could be things such as exercise, cooking a meal at home, visiting a friend, religious engagement, venting to a spouse or partner, hiking, biking, gaming, crafting, sewing and more. The first year of practice is hard but the first 6 months can be very hard.<sup>1</sup> Adjusting to practice can be difficult because of the extreme change in responsibility. One of the most profound changes is that students are no longer students with teachers or helpers behind their shoulder, these new veterinarians are still capable of asking for help. Always remember that help could be a text, email or phone call away to a mentor. A mentor could be a veterinarian's employer, coworker, friend or colleague from another state or country.

## Practical supplemental tips

Tips outside of the scope of skills may benefit new veterinarians in any area of medicine, but for dairy or mixed animal veterinarians, the following information outlines some major tips for success beyond technical skills.

Be wary of one's personal health. This is not limited to making time for health care or appointments, making time for exercise or making time for self-reflection. A good tip is also to find comfortable shoes<sup>2</sup> and professional clothing. If the veterinarian is not comfortable, then the daily tasks will not occur with relative ease or may impinge the veterinarian without provocation.

Keep a set of tools on the veterinary truck or in the practice. Tools such as a hammer, a few screwdrivers, a few nails and/or screws, duct tape or similar product, super glue, wrenches or adjustable wrench, pocketknife or similar product, extra rope and a flashlight. All of these tools may save a veterinarian from being stranded in a random pasture with just a mean "momma cow" or driving home safely. Keeping human medications in one's practice vehicle will be required. The unknown of being on the road far from home with a bout of indigestion or nausea is better when medications are an arm's-reach away. A first-aid kit can be a simple, inexpensive tool to invest in, and is also suitable to write off as a business expense. Other truck items may include wet wipes or baby wipes for cleaning up bodily appendages, an extra set of batteries, a phone charger, a small food warmer that is battery-powered or plugs into the vehicle, an extra set of clothes and more.

## Conclusion

The success of a veterinarian is dependent on the goals of the veterinarian individually. There are several skills that can benefit the dairy and mixed animal veterinarian. Technical skills are the introduction to the remainder of skills in veterinary medicine that will benefit the practitioner, the client and the patient. Social and emotional skills will benefit the professional goals of the practitioner given that the clinician also is wary of the challenges to their physical and mental health. The main goal of new dairy and mixed animal veterinarians is to not be afraid to fail, because failure is not a measure of success, but a journey to success.

## References

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