Routine Herd Fertility Monitoring – A Necessity or Money Down the Drain?

Mark A. Varner

Department of Animal & Avian Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742
E-mail: markv@umd.edu.

Take Home Messages

- The role that veterinarians play in monitoring herd fertility has changed.
- Dairy producers can do many routine tasks formerly done solely by veterinarians.
- Just because producers can do the task, doesn't mean they should do them independent of a coordinated approach with their veterinarian.
- Veterinarians need to have a modern set of skills, regularly updated through continuing education.
- Veterinarians need to use a modern set of tools, including integration of ultrasound examination in herd fertility programs.
- Dairy producers should hire progressive and modern veterinarians and be willing to pay for their services.

Introduction

Dairy producers have many tasks on their farms, but they may not have time to accomplish all of those tasks. For example, it has been estimated that more than 95% of dairy producers employ a tax adviser or accountant to handle their farm business tax preparations (Hilty, 2009). They do this for many reasons, including the time required to prepare tax forms, the technical knowledge of tax rules and the legal liabilities of filing incorrect tax forms.

One group of tasks that many dairy producers perform is related to routine herd fertility treatments. Trends in statistical measures of dairy cattle reproductive performance indicate that fertility is declining (Pursley, 2007). Declining reproductive performance also leads to lower profits, which means producers have to consider each cost on the dairy farm carefully. These factors have led, in part, to some producers questioning whether paying a

WCDS Advances in Dairy Technology (2009) Volume 21: 9-11

veterinarian for routine herd health visits is worth the money expended. The objective of this presentation is to describe how veterinarians can pay for the costs in their services by aiding the dairy producer in reaching their goals for herd reproductive performance.

Trends in Herd Veterinary Services

Changes in the types of veterinary services offered to dairy producers over time were recently reviewed (Brand and Peeters, 2008). Veterinarians were first called for emergency health issues like dystocia, milk fever and infectious diseases. Regularly scheduled visits then became common in the 1970's, where certain types of cows were examined, but the focus was on pregnancy examination and diagnosis/treatment of reproductive disturbances. When expanded to include other diseases or management fields, the veterinary programs were called "Production Medicine Programs." These authors propose that herd veterinarians take on a new role by increasing their understanding of a cow's metabolism so that they can identify potential problems in advance of the problem causing herd health or production issues. This was termed the "Inside-Outside" approach to herd fertility problems. The Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach has been widely adopted in many manufacturing fields, including food safety, and has led to a significant decrease in microbiological contamination of food products, like meat. It has been proposed that the HACCP principles be applied to dairy herd health and reproduction (Noordhuizen et al. 2007), but these principles have not been widely adopted in dairy veterinary medicine.

The benefit:cost ratio of veterinary management of dairy herd fertility has not been extensively studied, but recent estimates from Switzerland indicate that a $4 benefit to the dairy producer for every $1 cost in veterinary services (Casura et al, 2000). More than 75% of dairy producers felt that veterinarians more than paid for the cost of their services. More research is required on this topic however.

References

Hilty, B. J. 2009. Personal Communications

Pursley, R. 2007. Profitable reproductive management of high-producing dairy herds. WCDS Adv. Dairy Tech. 19:187-200.

Brand, A. and K.A.M. Peeters. 2008. Farm Management: The "Invisible Cow" in Herd Health Practices. Proc. XXXV Jubilee World Buiatrics Congress. Budapest, Hungary, 6-11 July.

Noordhuizen, J.P.T.M, J. Cannas da Silva, J.S.C. Voersema, and A Vieira (Eds.). 2007. Applying HACCP-based Quality Risk Management on dairy farms. Wageningen Academic Publishers. Wageningen, NL.

Casura, Ch., A. Ewy and P. Rusch. 2000. Veterinary assisted management and production programs in dairy herds. Proc. 9th Ann. Symp. Inter. Soc Vet. Epidem. Econ. 1192-1193.