Welfare advice is better received with expert delivery

By Karli Longthorne

The health and well-being of dairy herds is paramount to producers and veterinarians alike. But sparking conversations about welfare issues—leg and neck injuries, calf care, lameness, timely euthanasia and general physical health—requires effective communication by a trusted expert.

A study involving 36 Ontario dairy farmers by University of Guelph PhD student Stephanie Croyle and Prof. David Kelton and colleagues from the Department of Population Medicine showed that most farmers trust veterinarians with whom they have established a relationship to raise concerns about welfare issues and provide animal care advice.

“Understanding how farmers prefer to be approached about welfare issues—when, how or by whom—is key to increasing receptivity to animal care advice and ultimately impacts the health and well-being of herds,” says Kelton.

Farmers held four key expectations.

First, they expect to have established a trusting relationship with their veterinarian.

Second, farmers expect the veterinarian to be an expert on dairy animal care.

As well, when raising animal welfare issues, farmers want to be provided with advice in a tactful manner.

And finally, farmers expect their veterinarian to identify welfare issues that they might otherwise become accustomed to—a concept called “barn blindness.” That happens when farmers become accustomed to minor welfare issues and they need someone who is not on the farm every day—like their trusted veterinarian, to help them recognize these problems and help to address them.

“Because veterinarians are perceived to be responsible for identifying welfare issues at the herd and at the individual cow level, it’s critical they address these four expectations to spark and sustain on-going conversations with farmers,” says Kelton.

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