

Welfare advice is better received with expert delivery

Veterinarians should consider four key farmer expectations, say researchers

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 blind to—a concept called “barn blindness.” That happens when farmers become accustomed

Farmers' expectations

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1 Solid relationships
Farmers want to hear from someone who understands the ins and outs of their farm, someone who they have worked with and who has their best interests at heart.
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2 Expert advice
Farmers want someone who has expertise in animal care and welfare issues, such as veterinarians who are familiar with welfare issues at the farm level.
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3 Positive communications
Veterinarians can improve engagement with welfare issues by positively communicating welfare issues with tact, by incorporating positive feedback, and by collaborating to solve a problem.
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4 Barn blindness prevention
Farmers want veterinarians to alert them to welfare issues that they might have become accustomed to, a concept called “barn blindness.”

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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