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Although many who use this textbook may already have developed pricing strategies and scheduling policies for their veterinary practice, expanding into the world of livestock medicine may require review and updating of these policies. Deciding whether you will provide haul-in services or farm calls, understanding veterinarian and staff knowledge and comfort levels, and reviewing hourly income requirements for supporting practice and operating costs all require consideration when determining pricing and policies for your clinic's expanded services.

FARM-CALL VERSUS HAUL-IN

Depending on the predominant livestock species in your area and your particular business interests, a decision must be made as to whether large animal care will take place on-farm or in-clinic. There are benefits and downsides to each option. For practices that currently operate out of a brick-and-mortar facility, offering farm-call services may present a challenge for efficiency, and it may be difficult to price these services to bring in similar income levels as practitioners can sustain with in-house appointments. It is possible to develop pricing strategies that allow farm-call services to be financially feasible, and these will be discussed in the next section. Another challenge that practitioners and staff may face when offering on-farm services is lack of adequate facilities. This can also affect efficiency as well as safety, and great care should be taken when training reception staff to identify potential facility deficiencies during scheduling and make the client and practice staff aware of these concerns to allow for adequate planning and mitigation. In on-farm care situations, the veterinarian and their staff must take special considerations for biosecurity, especially packing multiple pairs of outerwear (i.e. coveralls) and cleaning of boots and equipment before they leave one facility to head to another. Finally, practices will likely need to make some significant financial investments in equipment as well as a vehicle to provide farm-call services. If the practice is unable or unwilling to purchase a vehicle, employees may be reimbursed for the use of their personal vehicle for this purpose. However, special considerations should be made for insurance coverage in these situations to ensure that equipment and the vehicle are covered while on-farms. In addition, many practices will find it useful to purchase another set of equipment to be taken on the road in addition to what is already housed at the clinic. Items such as ultrasounds that are used in small animal and equine practices are generally much more cumbersome, delicate, expensive, and unnecessarily “fancy” for the requirements of livestock work. Investing in a more sturdy, portable, and simple machine will be less expensive than the one used in-house and will also prevent damages to that equipment that would likely result from the rigors of transportation and on-farm use. There are also additional tools that are used for livestock care (such as halters and disbudding irons), which are not required for companion animal or equine medicine but would be necessary for expanded services (Figure 1.1). Equipment specific to food animal care will be discussed later in this book.

Although on-farm service may require some additional considerations, it is not without its perks. Many livestock veterinarians enjoy their time outdoors and on the road. Unlike appointments in the office, most farm calls will take at least an hour to complete, which provides extended



FIGURE 1.1 A sport utility vehicle set up for ambulatory practice. An insert in the truck (commonly known as a “vet box”) is useful for organizing medications, equipment, and tools. Equipment that is commonly used together – such as for placing catheters, disbudding, performing surgery, or administering vaccines – may be more conveniently stored in a toolbox or tub. A microscope and other electronic equipment can be powered by a converter for the 12-V adapter with the engine running.

time for clients and practice staff to interact and become familiar with each other and build relationships that may take years to develop in a hospital setting. Farm calls provide practitioners with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the entire population of animals at that farm as well as the infrastructure and common practices that are used. This knowledge allows the veterinarian to evaluate risks for future problems and to develop a more comprehensive preventative care plan that is customized for that herd or flock. Clients also appreciate the convenience of ambulatory services, and this may be the only way that some are able to have their animals cared for, especially clients with mobility challenges of their own or those without the equipment required to transport their animals. The comfort that comes with being in their regular environment will go far in minimizing stress and facilitating handling of animals which will, in turn, improve efficiency and safety. Finally, while the number of animals that can be seen in a clinic is limited by both trailer space and clinic capacity, on-farm services are limited only by the time available to the practitioner and client.

Offering livestock care in-clinic is convenient and more efficient for practice staff. However, this practice model does also come with its own inherent limitations. If bovine work will be offered as an in-house service, then additional investments must be made to procure bovine-specific handling and restraint equipment. A quality chute and corral system can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars and is essential for the safety of staff and animals. Transportation of livestock can also present a challenge for clients as they may not have access to a livestock trailer or vehicle capable of towing. The number of animals that a practice serves at one time via in-clinic service is also limited as opposed to on-farm care, which is only restricted by the handling equipment’s capacity. Even if the practice is only seeing smaller livestock such as poultry, pigs, or small ruminants – which can be transported in passenger vehicles – these prey species may be placed under a significant amount of stress when they encounter the sounds and smells associated with a facility that is

frequented by predator species such as canids and felids. Flooring that is used for small animal practices can also present challenges to hooved animals resulting in poor footing, which can exacerbate an already stressful situation. Heavy-duty rubber mats are a simple solution, which can be brought out for livestock patients and then easily removed for cleaning and storage. Another consideration when deciding whether to offer in-house service for livestock species is the odors associated with these animals. While many people familiar with agriculture may not find them offensive, if your current clientele is unfamiliar with such aromas, they may be unpleasantly surprised when your practice begins to smell like a barnyard. Finally, consideration must be given for the accessibility of your clinic to trucks and trailers. Parking lots may need to be expanded and unloading facilities installed. Many large animal practices have additional fencing around the entire property to prevent the escape of animals during loading and unloading. Some practices may be so entrenched in urban areas that they are challenging for livestock owners to get to or may cause concerns for animals in trailers becoming overheated or stressed while sitting in traffic or maneuvering on city streets.

In-house service does allow for certain benefits. First and foremost, practice staff has significant control over animal handling and safety, and practitioners are not left to the mercy of whatever the producer happens to have on-farm. While veterinarians may be frustrated that clients do not have animals caught and ready for on-farm services, this issue is eliminated by in-clinic options. Should the livestock team need more assistance or materials for a particular case, additional staff may be easily recruited and supplies procured from clinic stores. Additionally, this option is generally the most efficient for the business as veterinarians and staff can move between multiple cases quickly and are not constrained by travel time to and from the farm.

As with many decisions in veterinary medicine and business management, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Each practice situation is unique and must weigh each option differently based on their circumstances combined with the preferences of doctors and staff. Some may feel unsafe traveling to farms, especially if not accompanied by an assistant. Others may prefer to escape from the confines of a brick-and-mortar hospital and experience improved mental health through time spent in the truck and on-farm. Open communication between management and staff can help to ensure that the selected practice model benefits employees, clients, and management.

PRICING STRATEGIES

While many companion animal and equine practices will use an itemized invoicing system, most livestock practices base their charges on the amount of time a call requires with additional fees for travel expenses as well as drugs or materials required to complete the requested services. Below is a general formula for this charging schedule:

$$\text{Total bill} = \text{mileage rate (miles driven)} + \text{hourly rate (hours worked)} + \text{drugs and materials}$$

Setting a minimum call charge which is sufficient to cover basic operating costs can help to ensure that the practice is able to financially sustain this additional service while giving reception staff an easy baseline estimate for clients at the time of scheduling. There are many ways to structure this minimum call charge, but this author has had the most success by charging a set rate for the mileage within a certain radius from the practice along with a first-hour fee, which may be slightly higher than additional hours to account for materials and/or drugs. Alternatively, your office staff may be instructed to inform clients that material and drug charges will be in addition to the minimum call charge. The minimum call charge may be most effective for practitioners serving small farms or clients who request services that do not require a veterinary degree but take a veterinarian's time. For example, hoof trimming and vaccines can be performed by support staff but if a veterinarian is the only one in the practice capable of performing these procedures, they

must be compensated appropriately. The minimum call charge should cover the first hour of veterinary service and the cost of transportation to the farm with extra hours of work billed at a standard hourly rate. Hourly rates for veterinary services vary significantly based on location and may range from \$120 to upward of \$250, depending on various factors. Reviewing your practice's financial records to determine minimum profit requirements is a good place to start when establishing a pricing scheme. For practices that are able to send an assistant or technician on the road with the veterinarian, this must also be factored into the call fee as an additional hourly cost.

Practices offering in-clinic services may prefer to maintain consistency for the sake of front-office staff and use itemized billing. However, it is imperative to understand that these costs will likely not be universal across species. For instance, a Cesarean section in a large dog may cost upward of \$1500 and will include general anesthesia, IV fluids, and extensive monitoring equipment. The same procedure in a similarly sized goat or sheep would likely incur much lower costs given that this surgery is commonly performed on a standing animal under local anesthesia and little to no sedation. Therefore, prices should still be customized for the species receiving care.

Regardless of the pricing strategy or whether services are offered on-farm or in-clinic, payment should be collected at the time of service. Traditionally, livestock veterinarians will bill clients monthly to better align with the patterns of cash flow on a commercial farm. However, most companion animal and equine practitioners who are branching out into livestock medicine will not be working with commercial farms, and visits will likely not be frequent enough to warrant monthly billing and you should not feel obligated to honor the billing schedule of another practitioner. Those offering ambulatory services may find it challenging or unpleasant to create an invoice in front of clients at the end of the call. However, this can be a useful exercise for the practitioner and the client. In cases where efficiency was a limiting factor for the appointment, this is an opportunity to discuss labor or facility challenges and develop a plan for addressing them. For practices using digital software for billing, reception staff may be trained to create an estimate for the appointment during scheduling which can then be converted into an invoice and edited as appropriate at the culmination of the appointment. This can not only help to set client expectations of cost before the appointment but also decrease the amount of time required for the practitioner to create the invoice at the end of the visit. This may be challenging in areas where cellular service is unavailable (if using a cloud-based software) and will likely require investment in a computer or tablet. Because most practices use this technology for processing transactions with a credit card reader and point-of-sale software, this is a reasonable investment for anyone offering on-farm care.

The American Association of Bovine Practitioners offers Rural Practice Management Workshops annually, which are supported by a grant from the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Workshops aim to provide opportunities for practitioners and practice managers to network and hone their business management skills within the context of livestock production medicine with a special focus on practices operating in underserved communities. You can learn more about these workshops by visiting the AABP website (<http://aabp.org>) and searching "Rural Practice Management Workshop."

MENU OF SERVICES

As a newly minted veterinarian trying to establish my ambulatory practice in southern California, I was faced with many opportunities for personal and professional growth. Some of the situations that pushed me to improve my medical knowledge the fastest were for services or problems that I had never encountered before. For the most part, this is how much of our learning progresses as veterinarians as we are constantly facing new disease presentations or surgical techniques that we were not taught in school. During my time in practice, however, I did draw a few hard lines and I would strongly encourage anyone entering practice to take time to do the same. The boundaries

that I set were based on my experience, current knowledge base, and my willingness to step outside my comfort zone. For example, during my first 2 years in practice, I focused on bovine, small ruminant, and camelid care. By declining any poultry, swine, or equine requests, I was able to focus on a population that I was relatively comfortable with while still vastly expanding my skills and knowledge base. Once I gained my confidence working with these species, I expanded my services to include pigs and horses.

Setting boundaries is a core skill that veterinarians, support staff, and management personnel can only develop through practice. The best way for a practice to support its staff and doctors during the transition of expanding into a new market is by limiting services to those that employees are comfortable offering. Although the goal of this textbook is to orient veterinarians to diseases and procedures that are commonly encountered in livestock species, disregarding a veterinarian or staff member's comfort level can be alienating and lead to burnout and/or turnover. Establishing a list of services that will or will not be offered by your practice is an ideal resource for reception staff. Individuals scheduling appointments should also be encouraged to check in with the provider before scheduling an appointment if they are unfamiliar with the request. Clients should also be informed that a limited menu of services will be offered initially, which can be expanded based on staff comfort and community needs. Questions that may be useful for developing your practice menu include:

What species are you willing to see?

What procedures and services are you comfortable offering?

How long should appointments be scheduled for?

What kinds of appointments will you want an assistant for?

Will you offer farm calls or only see appointments in the office?

Are you willing to allow clients to keep drugs on-farm?

What will after-hours care look like?

When and how should clients contact veterinary staff if they believe their animal is developing or has an urgent problem?

It is important to note that any services provided must be within the context of a veterinarian–client–patient relationship (VCPR) as defined by each state's individual Veterinary Practice Act, which generally restricts a VCPR from being established solely by telephone or other electronic means. Another common requirement from veterinary practice acts is plans for emergency follow-up evaluation and care. If other practices in your area are offering livestock services, joining forces to provide after-hours care for each other's clients may help to decrease strain on each individual practice while building camaraderie within your community. In areas where livestock veterinary service is limited or nonexistent, this responsibility may fall solely on your practice should you enter this realm of medicine. As a reminder, the Act specifically mandates provision of follow-up evaluation and care, implying that care for clients without a valid VCPR is not required.

While some clients may wait until they have an emergency to develop a VCPR with their local veterinarian, many veterinarians have stopped offering emergency and after-hours care to nonclients. This allows clinics to focus resources on clients who understand the value of developing a relationship with the practice and not just using it for after-hours and urgent needs which put additional physical, mental, and emotional demands on veterinarians and staff and are a commonly cited reason for burnout among livestock practitioners. Establishing care through regularly scheduled wellness or nonurgent visits is also an opportunity for

veterinarians to perform an annual/semiannual visit and familiarize themselves with the goals, which should be explained to clients as a benefit included with the cost of the annual visit. Many clients will contact the practitioner for additional advice or input, even if a farm-call is not required. Some practitioners may even encourage this practice or spend time developing resources for their clients to prevent them from seeking information from other, potentially less accurate sources (i.e. the internet). Including this expected future interaction (and the time required to manage it) in your minimum call fee is one way to ensure that practitioners and staff are compensated for their time and effort when offering remote care. Clients will also appreciate a value-added service when they are informed that by establishing care with your practice, they are entitled to receive some level of interaction either by phone, email, or text message to manage small questions that may arise. This service can, of course, not only benefit the client by providing useful veterinary guidance, but also benefit the practitioner and support staff by providing another point of care for reviewing farm protocols, discussing preventative care strategies, and identifying potential problems before they cause serious challenges to animal health and welfare. Not every client will see value in these services, and each practice must decide individually whether to cater to these clients.

CLIENT EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

One of the keys to avoiding unnecessarily negative interactions between clients and the practice is to set boundaries and communicate them clearly and as early in the relationship as possible. This should include signage within the clinic, notices on the website, and verbal communication of relevant policies during phone interactions. Community education events can also be an effective way to build a positive relationship between the practice and its clients while providing an opportunity to make clients aware of practice policies including establishment of care, availability of after-hours services, pricing strategies, and common safety hazards that may affect the ability of the veterinary team to provide adequate care for patients. These events do not have to be focused on practice policies but are an excellent time to make clients aware of them. Using community education events to set a baseline of knowledge for clients about basic care and husbandry, identification of abnormalities, pregnancy management, and basic birth evaluations and interventions can decrease the repetitive information sharing that practitioners do for clients, improve patient care and outcomes, and build rapport between the practice and community. These events can take many forms such as a sponsored dinner, weekend lectures, and even wet labs. Reaching out to your local extension office or veterinary school may also offer additional resources including use of models, advertising, or funding to assist with purchasing refreshments. Collaboration may also be a way to bring in outside experts on a specific topic that can also provide your veterinarians and staff with new insights.

While these events may be convenient opportunities to share your practice policies with clients, the focus of these events is usually a topic pertaining to husbandry, nutrition, or veterinary care. Common topics of focus for community education events include:

- Basic care and husbandry of various livestock species

- On-farm procedures (i.e. castration, tail docking, disbudding) and pain management

- Nutrition basics for various life stages

- Pregnancy and postpartum management

- Sample collection and submission to a diagnostic laboratory

- Milk quality monitoring and troubleshooting

Individual animal identification, record-keeping, and utilization to improve productivity

Vaccination and deworming recommendations

Biosecurity

Emergency preparedness

While the lecture itself will be a wealth of information for attendees, offering a list of suggested resources can help steer clients toward legitimate information and avoid questionable or downright inaccurate guidance which is so readily available via social media and the internet.

PREPARING YOUR STAFF

Educating clients and the community is integral to supporting the well-being of the clients and animals in your community. However, supporting the well-being of your own practice staff must not be overlooked and its importance cannot be overstated. Adding new services and expanding practice operations can be quite overwhelming for everyone involved. Preparing staff before the transition and providing additional support in the way of time and continued training is imperative to maintaining positive morale within the office and ensuring the success of your new business endeavor. While veterinarians may be brushing up on their livestock knowledge, many reception and technical staff may have never received any training about working with these species.

Reception staff will require training to enable them to schedule appointments appropriately while setting client expectations. Important, livestock-specific information to be gathered when scheduling appointments includes:

- Location of facility (if performing farm calls)
- Species, breed, production class, and number of animals to be seen
- Reason for appointment
- Vaccine history within the past 12 months. Staff should specifically ask about tetanus vaccination, sometimes referred to as CD&T
- Restraint, handling facilities, and extra labor available
- What therapies client has already administered

When scheduling appointments, it is always best to overestimate the amount of time required to complete the task. For example, while one might expect that vaccinating a dozen sheep and trimming hooves would be a relatively simple call requiring no more than 45 minutes, there are several ways that a call like this can easily require an hour or more. If the client does not have the animals caught in a holding pen before the vet arrives, or a problem may be identified with one of the animals during handling, or after discussing the farm's preventative health plan, the producer may request that the veterinarian FAMACHA score each animal as well and collect fecal samples on any who appear to be anemic. There are several tactics that receptionists can use to try and prevent these – or other – schedule deviations. Informing clients that additional services requested during the appointment may not be possible due to scheduling and that billing is based on the amount of time required to provide care can be highly motivating to clients to plan ahead. A specific reminder to have animals caught in a holding pen and/or restrained when the vet team arrives can also help to avoid wasting time during the appointment (and will also save the client money). For practices using digital software for scheduling and invoicing, training reception staff to create an estimate for appointments (especially farm calls) during scheduling can be useful for

a number of reasons. It provides clients with some expectation for expenses while also providing a template for practitioners to update after the call is complete and then convert to an invoice which saves time. Again, requesting assistance from the veterinarian or technician in creating these estimates – especially at the outset of offering these services – can help to ensure that the client receives an accurate number and will help to train staff accurately. Reception staff also needs to be informed how livestock patients should be moved through the clinic if in-house services are offered. Points of entry and exit, parking for vehicles with trailers, and finally, especially for jobs that will require working large numbers of animals, requesting clients have extra help on hand is also helpful. Receptionists should be encouraged to consult with the veterinarian who will see the case to ensure that adequate time is set aside for travel as well as time on-farm.

Veterinary technicians and assistants will also need training before livestock services are rolled out. Topics of particular significance for this team include safe animal handling and restraint, phlebotomy, appropriate injection sites, common surgeries and procedures, and biosecurity. The topics that are covered during community education events should already be covered for practice staff before rolling out these new services. While on-the-job training is to be expected, preparation in the form of in-person trainings such as lecture presentations and animal-handling experiences as well as written resources – such as textbooks – is ideal for properly preparing animal care staff. If possible, identify a few livestock producers within the community (i.e. a friend of a staff member or someone who already uses the practice for other veterinary services) who will allow their animals to be used for demonstration and teaching purposes. Plan a staff-training event where basic handling and procedures can be practiced in the setting that you plan to offer services. This training may be aligned with a need of the producer so as to provide a service (i.e. vaccinations, castrations, etc.) in exchange for the use of their animals.

One topic that bears particular emphasis for all practice staff is drug use in livestock species. Anyone not involved with these species may be unaware of the regulations surrounding drug choice and use. While explanation of specific details may vary in necessity based on the employee's role within the practice, all employees must be made aware that there are laws and regulations that govern drug use in food-producing animals and the list of restricted and prohibited drugs in food animals should be posted within the clinic. Additionally, employees should be made aware of the presence of meat and milk withdrawal times and their significance. Providing basic information about on-label drug use and extra-label drug use will also help to make reception and animal-handling staff aware of important topics to be aware of and help them to identify client questions that should be handled with more care for livestock patients than companion animal or equine patients.

UNDERSTANDING CLIENT MOTIVATION AND PRIORITIES

Many practitioners using this textbook will be serving small-scale farms and producers who may not be relying on their livestock as a sole source of income, unlike commercial producers. While income may be a factor for most small-scale producers as well, they may also harbor other motivations for keeping these animals. By understanding the reasons that clients keep food-producing animals and the goals that they have for their operations, we – as veterinarians – can better define our role within their operation and more effectively identify ways that our skills can help to achieve those goals. This is beneficial for both the producer and the practitioner. While there are many reasons that people decide to keep livestock, most producers can fit into one of four basic categories:

- **Homesteaders:** These types of producers generally raise livestock as a source of food for their family and may also sell animal products for income. Many of these producers have elected to raise their own animals to avoid purchasing commercially produced meat, milk, or fiber or in order to expose their children to the work and satisfaction associated with food production.

When making decisions, these producers may focus more on animal finances and herd health than on an emotional attachment to the animal.

- **Show clients:** These types of producers keep and breed animals for competition purposes and may focus on confirmation and production capabilities when selecting animals for their herd or flock. It is important to note that biosecurity is paramount for these clients as their animals generally travel to shows, fairs, and competitions frequently where they are exposed to strange animals with unknown pathogen exposure status. Although most states require certificates of veterinary inspection (CVIs) to verify an animal's health status before such events, asymptomatic animals may expose naïve animals to novel pathogens easily through direct contact or fomites. Veterinarians can play an important role in creating or reviewing biosecurity plans for producers who participate in these types of animal exhibitions. Cosmetics may be a higher priority to these producers when considering surgical procedures or wound repairs. Practitioners should also be cognizant of show dates and deadlines when considering drug selection as withdrawal dates will be pertinent for shows resulting in processing of the animal. When completing CVIs for these animals, it is imperative that only healthy animals be allowed to travel and participate in exhibitions.
- **Seedstock operations:** These types of producers function to produce high-quality, production-class animals. This term is generally used to describe producers who develop lines of animals with highly desirable production traits including mothering ability, birthing ease, milk production, meat quality, or fiber characteristics. While these animals may also attend shows (especially fiber and dairy animals), the primary goal of a seedstock producer is to develop animals that will be sold to other producers to improve specific qualities of their herd or flock. Generally, cosmetics are a lower priority than functionality for these producers.
- **Hobby farmers:** These are a growing group of livestock owners who warrant special consideration for several reasons. These clients generally value their emotional connection with their animals over production capabilities or financial motivators. In fact, these animals may have no productive role at all on the farm and may solely serve as companions for their owners or other animals. Veterinarians and their staff must remember that food-producing species are classified as such despite the individual purpose of the animal. This principle must guide drug choices and recommendations for pet livestock as well. Animals may be rehomed due to various factors and may find themselves as a production animal with a risk of entering the food chain. Therefore, consideration of potential drug residues should still be made for livestock patients filling companion roles.

Of course, these categories are very broad and may not apply to every client that you will encounter. In order to more accurately identify motivations and goals of individual clients, consider including a brief husbandry questionnaire in your practice's new client paperwork. This may include what species they own, how many animals they have, housing and facilities, and any goals for the operation. Adding questions to explore nutrition, biosecurity practices, and reproductive strategy used on-farm can also provide valuable insights and may help detect risk factors for potential problems. Whether offering individual animal care or herd health services, understanding clients' short- and long-term goals can be invaluable for steering your interactions and can also provide insight as to how to create additional opportunities for your business. This is also an opportunity for clients to reflect on their own production system and their goals for it. Some clients may not have considered setting goals for their farm and, by doing so, will add more structure and purpose to the decisions they make regarding their livestock.