

Mastitis control: Seize the Opportunity

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Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the (possible) role of the veterinarian as an effective udder health advisor, as perceived by both, farmer and veterinarian.

Methodology

- Questionnaire 378 Dutch Dairy farmers
- farm size > 50 cows
 - farmer < 57 years
 - participating in test day recording
 - anonymity guaranteed
 - specialized in cattle
- Questionnaire 93 veterinarians
- of 30 Dutch veterinary practices

Results and discussion farmers

Table 1 shows that farmers are very positive about their veterinarian. The veterinarian is the first and most important information source when farmers have questions regarding mastitis.

In addition, the farmers value the advice of the veterinarians and have trust in their knowledge. Although farmers might have answered these questions in a social desirable way, the lack of variation in the results seems to indicate that veterinarians can play an important role in communication about udder health and mastitis to farmers.

Table 1: Farmers' perceptions on their veterinarian (N=378)

STATEMENTS	FREQUENCY (%) ¹		
	A	B	C
I can get along very well with my veterinarian	1	6	93
I have a lot of trust in the knowledge of my veterinarian	2	6	92
The veterinarian is the first to go to when I have questions about mastitis	4	5	91
My veterinarian is a very important source of information regarding mastitis	4	5	91
My veterinarian gives valuable advice regarding mastitis	2	10	88
My veterinarian can explain things very well to me	3	9	88
My veterinarian always explains the things he does	3	11	86

A = (partly) Disagree, B = Neutral, C = (partly) Agree

¹ Scored from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Values 1 and 2 are combined, as well as values 4 and 5.

Results and discussion veterinarians

Table 2 shows that veterinarians perceive the increase of udder health on farms as their job responsibility. Furthermore, they agree that the communication skills of the veterinarian, and the trust of the farmer are very important to insure that farmers implement the advice. Most veterinarians also agree that they have a lot of knowledge regarding the prevention and control of mastitis. As such, also from their own perspective, the veterinarian seems to be the best candidate when implementing a communication strategy regarding mastitis control.

However, Table 2 also shows that on some aspects the veterinarians do not agree with each other. About one third of the respondents think that regular contact with other farm advisors is not necessary. Moreover, some veterinarians think that they can hardly influence udder health on a farm. Another important issue is taking initiative to talk about udder health. About 24% of the veterinarians start a conversation even if the farmer does not perceive a problem. In general the results indicate that udder health is only put on the agenda when the farmer takes the initiative and perceives a problem. A lack of initiative from veterinarians might result in a lack of action of farmers. Farmers seem to appreciate the veterinarians knowledge and advice, but the results of the questionnaires show that not all veterinarians take this opportunity.

Table 2: Veterinarians perceptions on udder health advice (N=93)

STATEMENTS	FREQUENCY (%) ¹		
	A	B	C
Increase of udder health belongs to the job responsibility of veterinarians	0	1	99
Whether farmers implement the advice depends on the communicative skills of the veterinarian	4	7	89
Whether farmers implement the advice depends on the trust of the farmer in the knowledge of the veterinarian	8	6	86
I have a lot of knowledge regarding the control of mastitis	1	29	70
I have a lot of knowledge regarding the prevention of mastitis	1	36	63
Bad farm management is a good reason to start talking about udder health	15	42	43
I have a lot of influence to increase udder health	5	53	42
It is relevant to discuss udder health with other farm advisors regularly	33	39	28
When a farmer does not perceive a problem, I will still take action to talk about udder health	23	53	24

A = (partly) Disagree, B = Neutral, C = (partly) Agree

¹ Scored from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Values 1 and 2 are combined, as well as values 4 and 5.

Conclusions

- In theory the veterinarian is one of the best persons to give udder health advice, however, in real life there is much to gain. New developments in the dairy industry put extra demands on the udder health advisor. This study shows that ample opportunities exist for veterinarians as udder health advisors.
- According to farmers and with respect to mastitis, they are regarded the most important, most valuable and most influential source of information.
- Veterinarians need to be (made) aware of the knowledge and the power they contain in farmers' decision making. If veterinarians seize the opportunity, by investing in a customer oriented commercial approach and in disease prevention, and by cooperating with others, they will not only increase their credibility, their client satisfaction and their income, but also udder health.