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Why I work with dairies

SOMETHING happens to us when we age — quiet times of reflection occur more often, perhaps at least for me. It seems like such a short time ago I entered my chosen profession but it has been nearly 40 years! That’s unbelievable!

We all recall special times when we received blessings for diligence and hard work. This certainly is true in the dairy life. Many of you have been in your chosen life’s ambition for much longer than I; others are pursuing means to enter the dairy industry.

Our practice, like many other practices and dairy farms alike, mentors young people who may or may not have agricultural experience. Work experience and seeing firsthand life on a dairy farm (or perhaps detecting that unbecoming smell after spending a day with Dr. Mark) bring delightful discussions of the “whys” of nearly everything these young vets encounter.

What is it that continues to inspire those of us involved in the dairy life? I would like to share a few of my thoughts on that “why.”

In a class by themselves

Hopefully, after a day on our clients’ farms, my friends and students begin to realize that the dairy cow is impressive. Her biology is unquestionably fascinating! Not to diminish the other important food-producing animals, but her ability to convert “grass to glass” is quite a feat. All female mammals can produce milk, but there is little comparison to the extent of what our modern dairy cows produce.

My visits on dairy farms are filled with discussions about the “six freedoms of pasture” and our desire to fulfill the cow’s requirements in modern housing. Providing air, light, water, feed, rest, and space lays the foundation for thriving cows and for a successful dairy business.

Much of our time these days is spent on preventing disease. Still, herd health challenges and individual animal cases arise and provide weekly diagnostic and therapeutic discussions. Correct diagnosis of an underlying disease can be challenging yet rewarding. When driving out of the farm driveway, I reassure those suspicious of cows’ behavior that our patients actually like us! (Well, most of the time.)

The families and people

As I continue to practice vet medicine, the realization for me is that it’s the people — the owners, the employees, the farm teams, and the advisers — who make a difference. Over the years, I’ve tremendously enjoyed seeing how our dairy animals respond, oftentimes within days or weeks of positive change, to our husbandry practices. This could be providing new or renovated deep cow beds, more rest/space for your transition cows, or enhanced newborn calf hygiene and nutrition.

I hope to share and gain appreciation for the ambition and work ethic this industry is made of. Often, I witness multigenerational farm families mentoring from older to younger and sharing ideas from younger to older, providing the essential foundation for a viable, successful dairy. The dairy industry continues to exemplify stewardship, both with animals and our land resources, to the vast population watching. Most of my truck passengers comment, following our observations and discussions on the farm, “They really care.” Thank you for setting this example!

For me, dairy work has been a blessing beyond my dreams. How about you? I give you a smile, a compliment, and a question. What makes your life on the farm great? What is your story of blessings and faith? Let’s encourage one another and build each other up!

The author is a partner and large animal veterinarian at Thumb Veterinary Services in Deckerville, Mich.