MOOS NEWS

From the Stall of Dr. Shannon Finn



Differentiating Snake Oil from Useful Product: How Your Herd Health Vet Can Help!

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It's a common scenario on the farm… salespeople doing cold calls with flashy handouts on new products that can maximize your herd's productivity. Or you go to CDX and get bombarded with offers and sales pitches on new, cutting-edge products that promise to keep your animals healthier.

New products and innovations can be a great addition to your operation, but which ones are worth your time and money? As a part-time large animal vet and a part-time dairy farmer, I have the unofficial role on our farm as head of the department of "evidence discernment", and I think this is a great role for your herd health vet to take on!

Step 1: Ask For The Evidence



Any hesitation or lack of follow-up from a sales rep to provide you with the studies or evidence behind their product should be a red flag. When research summaries or packets are provided, it should be easy to find the citation and track down the original study (if it has been published) to at least assess study design and results.

Step 2: Show Your Herd Health Vet

It's always a good idea to ask your vet about any new products you might want to use on your animals. Having the actual research (instead of just a flyer) to give to your herd health vet would be best so we can spend more time evaluating the research rather than trying to track down the original studies.

Remember that for ProAction purposes, animal health products should have DIN numbers and be licensed to use on cattle in Canada. Feed additives should be included on the Canadian Feed Ingredients Table (CFIT) or undergo an evaluation by CFIA.

Step 3: Discuss

Sales paraphernalia is not an unbiased research summary. It is a highlight reel designed to sell product. It takes practice as well as time to critically evaluate the evidence behind the claims. Here are some common evidence "gaps" that we look at when evaluate research studies for products:

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Study population - is it the same species? Same industry? A sufficiently large sample size is important to provide the necessary power to deem results significant.

In vitro (in a petri dish under a microscope) vs **In vivo** (in a live animal). Both have merits, but a good product should have both types of studies backing it up.

Control groups - what is the product being compared to and is this relevant? Are there competing products that it has not been tested against?

Hierarchy of Evidence: Where Does Your Neighbour Fit In?

Veterinarians try to use the highest caliber of research studies when making clinical decisions on products, treatments and procedures, and reproduction protocols. This includes:

Meta-analyses which include:

- all of the cumulative research studies on one topic to find the definitive "best answer" for something
    - Example: what is the best treatment regime for ketosis in fresh cows?

Well-Constructed Clinical Trials which include:

- a large number of animals
- a study population that is randomly assigned to treatment or control groups
- where these two groups exist side by side under the same or similar environmental conditions

To say that this is all we use to make clinical decisions would be a lie. Firstly, all research should be taken into consideration, especially for new treatments or emerging modalities where a robust body of research may not be completed yet. We also use a combination of best evidence, past experience with similar cases, situational factors specific to the farm (facilities, help, animal temperament, finances etc.), anecdotal evidence or advice from colleagues…the list goes on. Similarly, you probably use a broad range of information when making daily decisions on the farm, and there is nothing wrong with that. Anecdotal evidence from neighbours or other field professionals can be a powerful influence and should not be discounted! However, it should be examined for bias and used as simply a portion of the body of evidence you use to make your decision, instead of the main driving source.

Step 4: Decide

If you do decide to try a new product, it is a good idea to make a plan for evaluating its efficacy and if you will continue using it. This may be on a dose basis (using a full bottle or package of something), an animal basis (trying it on ___number of calves), or a time basis (I will try it for ___ many months). Your vet can help you with record keeping or measurement in order to quantify the benefits of a product, whether that's disease incidence, reproduction data, average daily gain, or other measures - there should be something quantifiable to justify incorporating a product into regular use.

Conclusion:

It's very rare that a single product, whether evidence-based or not, will be the magic bullet to fix a problem on the farm. Even therapies as targeted and well-researched as vaccination still have their efficacy hinge upon management, environmental or individual cow factors. Be wary of any grand claims of massive gains (example: a product bumping up conception rate by 5%), and ask for the research in writing to share with your herd health vet. We are an invested partner in your herd's success and can offer a critical eye to help you decide what product is worth your hard-earned money.

Wishing you a Happy Thanksgiving!

May your heart be filled with gratitude, your home with love, and your table with joy.

