

## Embracing Difficult Questions

Dr. Jennifer Hubbard

March 2018

In 2015, I travelled to New Zealand to work as a locum (temporary) veterinarian for the dairy calving season. I was looking for a change, for a new challenge, and for a chance to placate my chronic travel bug that had been festering deep inside of me since I'd begun working full time as a veterinarian in the Ottawa Valley in 2011. I anticipated adventure, meeting new people, and learning about Kiwi-style dairy farming and vetting. I was not disappointed. Adventure came in many forms. I met new people and had fascinating conversations nearly hourly during my work days, and sampled the finest beers in the most scenic locations by night and weekend. And oh did I learn!

Some of my favourite (but not necessarily recommended) new tips include:

- 1) Bummed out about a dry calving? Use a lube pump and don't be shy! 10L of lube pumped into a uterus and the calf will just freestyle swim its way out on it's own.
- 2) Rehydrating mastitic Millie in a muddy field of beets in the freezing rain? Just use a 5L garden sprayer pump with an IV hose attached and voila! You'll both be galloping your way back to the milking shed in no time!
- 3) Wondering how you'll dehorn 800 wee calves today? Just attach a BBQ propane tank by hose to a burner and you've constructed a blue flame thrower that'll dehorn any calf in 4 seconds flat and burn down any old buildings you've been longing to collect insurance on.

**(Disclaimer:** The author does not exactly condone the use of the above tips (with the exception of lube, lube is always good, but maybe try 5 litres) and accepts no responsibility for the actions of readers who attempt to replicate the aforementioned procedures. Unless good things come of it...)

Tips such as these were what I imagined taking away from my practice time in New Zealand. I came away with so many valuable experiences that have made me a more versatile veterinarian and have expanded my thinking. However what had the most impact on me was not the veterinary experience in itself, but the state of the NZ dairy industry during that calving season, and the perspective it gave me on our own industry in Ontario.

By August 2015, the month I arrived in Canterbury, the milk price producers were forecast to be paid for the season had plummeted. The anticipated price that producers would receive was well below their projected cost of production for the season, meaning many would take a loss. By October, when I was finishing my locum, the payout forecast was even more dismal. The factors being blamed for the low world prices included decreased demand from China, decreased demand from oil-producing countries due to low oil prices, and increased production in Europe following the dissolution of quotas. The implications were devastating, even from my slightly removed perspective. Farmers couldn't afford to be producing milk even without the daily unexpected costs that arise like sick cows or a calving that requires veterinary assistance. Even though many cases could have successful outcomes with veterinary care, the only available option in these situations (considering

the welfare of the cow) is euthanasia. The day I finished my locum position, vet clinic staff and veterinarians were being let go. There wasn't enough work.

Fortunately for veterinarians, we have the option to retrain, work with small animals or other species, or seek employment with the government if tough times arise, even though we may not enjoy the idea. Producers aren't in such a position to easily diversify. Consequently it was expected that during the 2015-2016 dairy season 85% of New Zealand producers would not make a profit. In addition, 10% of all dairy farms were forecast to go out of business. Concurrent with these forecasts, industry publication headlines warned of the increase in suicides, mental health issues, substance abuse, and domestic abuse in rural communities in the face of the long dairy downturn.

This reality was upsetting to say the least. I felt for these producers and vets and other industry workers. Yet at the same time I couldn't help but feel a guilty sense of relief; I was just a visitor, this was temporary, this wasn't my country, my province, my clients and friends, or me.

But what if it *was*??? *Could it be*???

Here I was in New Zealand, a country that in my opinion has a far more favourable climate for low cost dairy production than Ontario. They have a population who is still relatively close to its agricultural roots, some of the most business-savvy producers I've ever met, and a geographic location that allows them easy access to emerging dairy markets for export. And yet in these bad times on the world dairy market, they were still failing.

So here they are, the awful but crucial questions I am adamant that we as an industry must ask ourselves even when we feel most secure in our supply management system:

Could we compete on the world market?

We may never lose our dairy quota. But I think we'd be naive to assume we won't. I also believe we'd be naive to assume our government would support our industry steadfastly if our powerful trading partner(s) continue to increase pressure in efforts to access more of our market.

If we did lose our quota, surely it would be phased out over years. But as we saw in the European Union, years don't guarantee success for everyone.

So if you woke up tomorrow to discover quota was being phased out, what would you do? (Giving up is not an option!) What changes would you implement immediately on your farm? Would your goals change? What would you value more, production or productivity? To what decimal place would you calculate your costs per kilo? How would it change the way you use or value service providers like veterinarians, nutritionists, crop and equipment specialists?

I'm not posing these questions to engage in scare tactics. On the contrary, I pose them so that we get comfortable considering all possible outcomes in this volatile era when planning for the future of our families, farms, businesses, and industry. Rather than becoming complacent we need to explore new approaches in our industry now while we have the luxury of enjoying the process rather than potentially facing it under dire stress.

We can and will compete if necessary. We have an extremely skilled, innovative, and envied dairy industry. But why wait? I propose that: If you have a goal, stretch it further. Make it an unreasonably ambitious one, even if those around you think you're crazy. Re-consider your actions and decisions as you go about your familiar tasks on auto-pilot. Perhaps you'll find opportunity. Entertain the ideas and opinions put forth by those you cross paths with each day, especially those you'd normally take for granted. Inspiration and solutions may be right in front of you.

I challenge us all to appreciate the industry we have, but to push ourselves further. Perhaps we will never need to answer the difficult questions, but in asking them we can only make ourselves better.