

Veterinary Technicians in Bovine Practice

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After we finished treating another case of metritis, Gary and I sat down to go over his dry cow and transition program. We had recently added anionic salts to the dry cow diet to help prevent the cases of milk fever that were predisposing his cows to metritis. We decided that testing the urine pH of the dry cows would be helpful to both monitor their feed intake and to ensure we had the proper amount of anionic salts consistently added to the dry cow diet. While Gary agreed the testing would be valuable, it was difficult for him to take on another task at herd health time. It was decided that our clinic's registered veterinary technician (RVT) would monitor the urine pH of the dry cows during our herd health visits. In addition, while at the farm, our vet tech would assess and record the body condition score of the dry cows, as well as conduct screening of the fresh cows for ketosis.

About one month after starting this monitoring program, based on the results of the RVT's testing of the dry cows, we could see that a small change needed to be made to the dry cow diet. From this point on, the cows that calved after being fed the improved dry cow ration, had no cases of milk fever and little metritis. The healthy fresh cows really took off in milk production. Both the producer and I were really happy with this outcome. We realized improvements had been achieved in a timely manner because of the extra information our RVT had collected on the farm. It really helped fix the problem we had been dealing with.

Registered veterinary technicians (RVT's, sometimes called Vet Techs) working with your herd vet can provide a lot of value to your farm. While used quite extensively in small animal veterinary clinics, more techs are graduating from veterinary technician college training programs with a strong interest in large animals and are looking for work with bovine-focused veterinarians. RVTs complete a two-year college diploma. Their education focuses on the science of animal health, but they also work hard to learn technical and practical skills. Gaining practical field experience is encouraged by the colleges and many local bovine veterinary practices try to assist with this by having student RVTs do externships with them.

In the past, RVT's have most commonly been utilized in food animal veterinary clinics to perform laboratory and record keeping tasks. RVTs have also routinely performed on-farm tasks such as calf dehorning for herd health clients to save valuable veterinarian and producer time. RVTs can improve the outcomes of dehorning for calves because of their ability to easily perform nerve blocks which prevent the calves from experiencing dehorning pain.

The skills that RVTs have and the tasks they can perform on farms goes beyond dehorning and record keeping though. In some veterinary practices, RVTs have implemented calf health monitoring programs where they weigh calves to assess growth and feed conversion, take blood samples to check the adequacy of colostrum consumption and test colostrum to assess quality. As part of mastitis prevention in cows, techs have been assessing and summarizing cow SCC records, performing CMTs (California mastitis testing)

on fresh cows or cows that producers think may have clinical mastitis, and collecting aseptic milk samples for culturing at the diagnostic laboratory. Other common duties for RVTs include disease monitoring and recording, vaccinating, hoof care and so on - the list goes on. Depending on what is required, the RVT may assist the vet at herd health or during other farm visits. For many clinics they do their own separate farm visits as well.

Utilizing our clinic's RVT helped another of our clients who had been having big issues with calf diarrhea. Lab work showed the cause of diarrhea was likely *rotavirus*. Calves were becoming sick in the first few weeks after birth. Vaccination of the cows and heifers before calving was the best way pass early protection on to the newborn calves. To be effective, the calf scour vaccines needed to be given at the right time and the time was geared to each individual cow's dry-off and calving date. The producer was concerned that these additional vaccinations could not be done at the right time as he was already struggling to keep the regular vaccines current. After discussion, our RVT came on board to look after not only the calf scour vaccinations but also to do all the other vaccinating for this farm. In addition the RVT was able to monitor total proteins in the calves on this farm to ensure they were getting enough colostrum. During the first visit, the RVT assessed all the calf feeding equipment for cleanliness using a luminometer. Based on the results we adjusted this farms protocol to help ensure all the feeding equipment was getting properly cleaned. This ended up being another win-win situation for the producer and allowed the herd vet to implement a good solution much more quickly.

Our practice has only been using an RVT on our client's dairy farms for the last two years. I am impressed with all the extra tasks we have been able to accomplish. Our producers really appreciate when the RVT can come to the farm to help collect data, do some routine tasks and assist the veterinarian with fine-tuning a solution to a herd problem. As producers milk more cows, labour on farm becomes a bigger and bigger issue. Being able to turn some cattle health tasks over to our trained, competent RVT is a service that really makes our jobs as veterinarians more satisfying and helps our clients implement their herd programs the way they want to.