

## **MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HERD HEALTH VISITS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This presentation is co-authored by Kevin Vilaca and Jeff Balfour in order to give you two perspectives: the veterinarian's view and producer's view. Our goal is to give you insight into our working relationship in order to show you how decisions have been made on farm over the last 6 years and to provide tips with real-life examples of changes we have made.

### **BACKGROUND – WHERE WE COME FROM**

**Dr. Kevin Vilaca, DVM – Maitland Veterinary Professional Corporation and Linwood Veterinary Clinic**

After graduating high school, I enrolled at the University of Guelph taking a four-year Bachelor of Science Agriculture Degree. Each summer I worked for the swine professors Dr. Cate Dewey and Dr. Bob Friendship at the Ontario Veterinary Collage, on the Ontario Sentinel Project funded by Ontario Pork.

After finishing my Agriculture degree, my interests in swine lead me to pursue a Masters Degree in Epidemiology with an emphasis in swine health. My research focused on the PRRS virus and how PRRS vaccination affected boar fertility. One year into my Masters Degree, I decided to pursue a Veterinary Degree. Not giving up on my Masters, I completed it during the summers that followed.

After graduation from OVC, I worked at Kirkton Veterinary Clinic for 2 ½ years as a swine veterinarian before joining Maitland Veterinary PC in 2006. Last year I started splitting my professional time between Maitland Veterinary PC and Linwood Veterinary clinics.

**Jeff Balfour- Jena Farms**

I purchased the original farm in 1986 and launched a 65 sow farrow-to-finish operation in a barn originally built in 1980. In 1988, an addition was added to the barn to increase the capacity to 150 sows, still farrow-to-finish. In 1996, a second barn was added for the finishing process and

the older barn renovated to increase the sow herd to 275 sows. At this time, Nancy and I also incorporated the farm, now known as Jena Farms Inc. Throughout this time period, the land base was gradually growing as well. In 2002, the decision to start three production sites was implemented. An 850-head sow barn was built on a nearby farm (within 4 miles of the “home farm”) and a newly built nursery barn was contracted to handle the early weans from this new sow barn. Since 2002, we’ve gradually added contract finishing spaces to the operation to handle most of the sow barns production.

## **BASIC WORKING PRINCIPLES**

### **Keys to Successful Working Relationship - Veterinarian Point of View**

First and foremost, it is vital that the veterinarian have a clear understanding of the goals and needs of the producer. This may sound simple, yet if the direction and long term goals of the producer are not clearly understood then frustration and miscommunication are inevitable. When was the last time you clearly explained to your vet what your goals and expectations are?

In these economic times, it goes without saying that costs and finances must be top of the priority list. It is vital that any decision that is made have an economic benefit. These decisions in turn must be based on solid science as well as an understanding if the science will apply to the specific clients’ farm. We have all seen the NEW “flavor of the month” that sweeps across the province promising to revolutionize the industry only to find it gone a year later.

Open communication is essential to success. Producers must be willing to hear the honest truth and not be offended by it or take it as criticism. It is of no value for the producer or the vet to walk onto a farm and sugar coat things when things are clearly not going well. Swine vets see many barns and have seen many different ways of doing the same thing. It is their responsibility to tell you which one would be best applied to your production situation. It is then the producers’ responsibility to take this information and make the final decision.

Veterinary medicine is not only about treating pigs and dealing with disease, but more importantly it is preventing these diseases from happening in the first case. There should be clear and open discussion with your vet to keep them up to date on things that are going on. All it takes is a phone call just to say “hey I have questions for you”. Most vets spend a great deal of their day behind the wheel of a car, so answering a quick question is not an issue. There have been numerous situations where a simple phone call caught things before they really got going. The end result is a healthier herd and ultimately that the producer has made money.

When it all comes down to it, it is the clients who have a mutual understanding of goals, coupled with regular and clear lines of communication, that have the best overall results from their vets. The medicine, science, production and disease side is the easy part. It is the relationship and trust between the vet and the producer that make the largest overall impact.

## **Keys to Successful Working Relationship - Producer Point of View**

In this competitive pig industry, producers need the very best from the people that they work with in order to benefit from today's technology and yesterday's experience. The veterinarian is a vital part of your business and not just from a disease point of view.

The Ontario pork industry has a very good infrastructure, thus a producer does not need to go very far from his own doorstep to find an expert in almost any aspect.

In our experience over the years, in order for your vet to be of value, he must be open-minded and upfront in his assessment of the current situation facing you. This means that you need to be prepared for the honest truth and not just what you want to hear. If you're paying for his advice, why not listen to him.

Your vet should be someone that you get along with and that understands you. This is a long term working relationship that you are building. If you don't get along with him then why look to them for advice.

Your vet should be a swine specialist in order to be able to provide up-to-date and science-based information and advice. He needs knowledge of not only the science and diseases but also the production and management of pig farming. It is then the producer's responsibility to take his advice and information, balance it with his own experiences and priorities and create a viable approach and solution to the problem at hand.

Your vet must be willing to acknowledge this procedure since it is the producer who is ultimately responsible for the economic outcome of the operation. Vets are consultants and should be able to adjust according to your needs and work toward a mutual resolution for the best possible outcome.

Often, the best results come from open, honest communication and ultimately a compromise between all the parties involved. At the end of the day, the people you surround yourself with in business have a large impact on the overall success of your operation. Make sure you pick these people wisely.

## **TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

Our goal for this presentation is to take these basic principles and show you, with specific examples, how they were applied in real life. This is an open presentation where both of us will give you our point of view and explain how and why we made specific choices. We encourage the audience to ask questions throughout the presentation. The following are topics with examples to illustrate specific points:

- Depopulation of nursery – Using production records to make decisions
- Staffing issues – Using the different approaches to get to the end result – staff get it done

- Making the most of your CQA – Taking the CQA as an opportunity to take stock and re-assess what and why we are doing things
- On farm trials – Having trials that allow us to assess in our own farm if it works or not
- PRRS Outbreak – how we came to a resolution
- Making big decisions – talking through all the options and openly stating opinions
- Vaccine decisions – How we make vaccine decisions for our farm