

DAIRY VETERINARIAN NEWSLETTER

March 2026

How do Dairy Producers Perceive Communication With Their Veterinarian?

There have not been many recent published surveys regarding how dairy producers perceive communications with their veterinarians. This is true within the U.S. or even much of the developed world. However, there was a very detailed and interesting survey of dairy producers in Ontario, Canada reported by A. DeGroot et al. in *Veterinary Record*, August-September 2021. From two sources, veterinarians listed as practice type “dairy” in the province of Ontario were identified. Veterinarians were randomly contacted and criteria for inclusion in the study were:

- Veterinarians had to spend at least 50% of their time in private food animal medicine practice
- Location was within a 2-hour driving distance from Guelph or Ottawa, Ontario
- Signing of written consent forms agreeing to be accompanied on farm calls for 2-3 days, with the goal of studying 5 veterinarian-producer interactions per veterinarian
- Producers also signed written consent forms at the beginning of the farm visit



Dairy veterinarian and producer working together. iStock

Most of the veterinarians initially identified as possible participants were excluded from the study; specific reasons were not stated. Presumably the major reasons were the type of practice as noted above and the distance away from Guelph or Ottawa. 496 veterinarians were identified, but 98 were deemed eligible and agreed to participate as well. 41 veterinarians from 22 veterinary clinics participated.

During 2018, 50 producer-veterinarian interactions were recorded. How many producers were asked to participate that year was “not tracked”. During 2019, 159 of 178 (89%) of producers agreed, ranging from 33% to 100% producer participation per veterinarian.

A camera with an audio mixer and wireless microphones were used to record the veterinarian-producer interactions. The mean and median number of producer-veterinarian interactions were 5.1 and 5, respectively, with a range of 1 to 9 interactions per veterinarian.



Dairy and food animal veterinarians often develop a long-term strong relationship with clients. iStock images.

Survey results

Of the 209 dairy producers, 205 (98%) completed a post-interaction survey on an iPad at the farm, 2 completed it by surface mail, and 2 did not complete the survey. The veterinarians completed 3 surveys, a demographic survey, a post-interaction survey for each farm visit, and a survey after each day of data collection. Of the 98 veterinarians, 89 (91%) also completed a self-assessment of their professional quality of life measuring “compassion satisfaction [sense of their own compassion]- - burnout - - and secondary traumatic stress”.

Veterinary Demographics and Self Assessments

Parameter	Mean	Median	Range	Descriptive Information
Age	42 years	37 years	26 - 72 years	
Years Since Graduation	15 years	11 years	1 - 47 years	
Gender	N/A	N/A	N/A	63% Male, 37% Female
Owner/Associate	N/A	N/A	N/A	51% Owner, 49% Associate
Communications Training	N/A	N/A	N/A	68% Yes
Food Animal Only	N/A	N/A	N/A	63% Yes
Mixed Practice	N/A	N/A	N/A	37% Yes
Work > 40 hours/wk	N/A	N/A	N/A	76% Yes
Compassion Satisfaction £	43	43	37 - 49	“High” Satisfaction
Burnout £	21	21	12 - 29	“Low” Burnout
Secondary Traumatic Stress £	19	19	10-29	“Low” Stress

£ 5 point scale, 10 questions each. Possible total score ranges from 5 (not zero) to 50 points.

“Best” Compassion score = 50. “Best” no Burnout or no Stress scores = 5 points. Modified from De Groot et al. 2021

It was a surprise to me that 24% of the veterinarians did not work > 40 hours per week, as shown in the previous table. It would be interesting to know what proportions of the food animal veterinarians and of the mixed practice veterinarians did so. I am fully aware that increasing numbers of veterinarians desire to work less days and hours per week, but I have not seen data indicating that one-fourth of food animal or mixed practitioners do not work more than 40 hours per week before. (During my 16 years in Upstate New York, I interacted with the Ontario dairy industry often; I did not perceive differences in working hours between there and the U.S. in those days.)

The questions asked regarding compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary traumatic stress were not reported. Nevertheless, the mean scores for compassion were above the score 4 response of “often”, asking about feelings of one’s own compassion, with 5 the highest. The mean scores for burnout and stress were at the score 2 response of “rarely” asking about feelings of those concerns about oneself, with 1 the lowest and best score for those items. Therefore, the results at least for this study population of veterinarians were encouraging. Veterinarians reported a high sense of satisfaction with their own sense of compassion, and burnout or stress were reported as relatively low.

Dairy Producer Demographics and Herd Characteristics

Parameter	Mean	Median	Range	Descriptive Information
Age	41 years	40 years	18 - 73 years	
Years With This Veterinarian	10 years	7 years	<1 - 40 years	
Gender	N/A	N/A	N/A	84% Male, 16% Not Reported
Owner/Partner	N/A	N/A	N/A	78% Owner or Partner
Post-Secondary Education	N/A	N/A	N/A	60% Yes
Dairy or Beef Farm	N/A	N/A	N/A	92% Dairy, 8% Beef ¥
Total No. of Cows	235	170	5 - 1590 cows	
No. of Lactating Cows	109	75	21 - 680 cows	
Was This a Herd Health Visit?	N/A	N/A	N/A	79% Yes
Herd Health ≥ 2 per Month?	N/A	N/A	N/A	63% Yes

¥ Small ruminant farm visits were eligible, but none were made as part of the study. Modified from De Groot et al. 2021

Nothing in the demographic results surprised me more than the relatively young age of the dairy producers. Surveys of producer age in the U.S. have increasingly shown an aging population. Recent surveys show the mean and median age of U.S. dairy farmers as 58 years, with 91% over 34 years old. Interestingly, a recent survey suggests that in Ontario, the mean dairy farmer age is 56 years. The population of producers who agreed to participate in this study were younger than average.

How Dairy Veterinarians and Producers Perceived Their Communications on the Farm

Question	Mean Score ±	% of Most Common Score
Did vet discuss the main problem?	Prod 3.8	Prod 85% 4
Satisfied with problem discussion?	Prod 3.8, Vet 3.1	Prod 83% 4, Vet 75% 3
Did vet listen to what you said?	Prod 3.9, Vet 3.0	Prod 92% 4, Vet 60% 3
Did vet explain the presenting complaint?	Prod 3.9, Vet 3.3	Prod 90% 4, Vet 59% 3
Did vet explain any treatment(s)?	Prod 3.9, Vet 2.1	Prod 89% 4, Vet 41% 1
Did vet ask if treatment manageable?	Prod 3.8, Vet 2.9	Prod 82% 4, Vet 54% 3
How well did vet understand you today?	Prod 3.9, Vet 2.4	Prod 86% 4, Vet 39% 3

± Scoring: 1 = None; 2 = A Little; 3 = Mostly; 4 = Completely. Modified from De Groot et al. 2021

In the table above, the veterinarians consistently rated their own communication with the producers lower than the producers did. This was particularly notable regarding treatment explanation. Possibly the veterinarian thinks back and realizes that they did not really explain the treatment much but the producer perceives full understanding from past familiarity with it. The study showed that participating producers were quite well satisfied with how their veterinarians communicated with them.

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The agreement of 89% of producers that were asked to have a filmed and recorded interaction with their veterinarians was impressive to me. However, the population in the study may have been biased toward fairly long time relations with their veterinarians and therefore agreeing to participate. Clients who were not fully comfortable with their relationship with their veterinarian, using multiple practices, or actively looking for a different herd veterinarian were probably unlikely to participate. The study still provides interesting information on demographics and how dairy producers value their veterinarians' communication skills.

In the discussion, the authors noted that these results were "different from studies involving simulated client-veterinarian interactions in companion animal medicine and actual physician-patient interactions in human medicine." They further noted something that all of our readers are likely familiar with, " - - within food-animal practice many producers work with their veterinarian on a regular basis, potentially resulting in a much different relationship." This is clearly one of the enjoyable aspects of dairy, food animal and mixed practice for many of us.

Please let us know your comments and suggestions for future topics. I can be reached at (435) 760-3731 (Cell), or David.Wilson@usu.edu.

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