

Work with your veterinarian on drug protocols

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Protocols spell out the treatment plan on farm for animal disease problems. All drug use on the farm should be covered in protocols.

Dairy animals get sick and it is the natural inclination of farmers as well as veterinarians to want to do whatever is possible to help that animal get better. That is why it is easy to reach for an antibiotic and why, if the animal is not responding to that antibiotic, to switch to another. However, what is easy and natural may not be best.

Antibiotic use in food animals has come under increased scrutiny as concerns have risen about antibiotic residues and about antimicrobial resistance. For these reasons, antibiotic use needs to be intentional and organized on farms. In addition, dairy producers need to know expected efficacy, potential adverse reactions, and follow-up monitoring for health problems. Changing medications and using multiple drugs often leave producers wondering what worked if the animal recovers.

Drug protocols are a plan for dealing with various diseases in advance. These protocols should differentiate treatments based on the severity of the disease symptoms and they should include a provision for what to do if it seems that the treatment is not working. Drug protocols, when followed, are a safeguard against the possibility of residues in food products.

Protocols then define the plan that producers and authorized farm employees will follow when they identify an animal with the symptoms that characterize a disease state, enabling them to act based on what their veterinarian has already approved. This does not mean that protocols take the place of the veterinarian when animals are sick. In fact, every protocol should clearly state when to quit and call the veterinarian.

Producers and farm employees have gained much knowledge and experience in diagnosing problems with animals. But sometimes the case is not typical, or it isn't responding as the producer expected. These are times to call the veterinarian.

The contents of a protocol start with the on-farm diagnosis of the problem. Each problem and degree of severity then would have a treatment specified, and if it involves drugs, the dose, frequency, route and duration of treatment would be indicated. In addition, each protocol should specify the withhold duration for milk and meat.

Protocols should cover all drugs used on the farm irrespective of whether the producer purchases them over the counter (OTC), through mail order or through the

veterinarian. No drugs should be present on the farm that is not included in a protocol. Any extra label drug use (ELDU) should be identified in protocols. ELDU requires non-label withdrawal times and these need to be specified.

While protocols formalize what producers will do when they identify a problem, these should not be set in stone. They should be reviewed at least annually and changes made if the results are not as good as the producer believes they should be or if there are changes in the availability of drugs on the market.

Dairy producers should schedule time with their herd veterinarian specifically to develop protocols for their herd. The development of protocols should be a joint effort with the producer, and maybe key employees, so that the farm goals are met. The veterinarian will sign the completed protocol, indicating that he or she has agreed to the specified drug use.

Records are an important part not only of every protocol, but of good health care and proper drug use on the farm. The protocol is what should happen, and records needs to be kept of what actually did happen. Each record of drug administration should be initialed by the employee or owner who has given it so that there is accountability.

The development and use of protocols will make an impact on standardizing and governing drug use on the farm. Additionally, they will provide confidence to both the producer and the public that milk and meat that are being sent to the market that is not only safe for consumption, but that the animals are well-cared for.

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