How to Help Your Vet Help You

Ann Wells, D.V.M.

Springpond Holistic Animal Health
Prairie Grove, AR

Many goat producers have a hard time finding a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about goats. Many veterinarians do not get much education themselves on goat medicine, although that varies from state to state and depends on where the vet received his or her veterinary medical degree. Other goat producers find it difficult to locate a vet who is interested in working on goats.

But there are things that goat producers can do that will allow them to find a vet and to help their vet help them.

Finding a Veterinarian

Many producers wait until they have a problem to locate a vet. This is the wrong time to be looking for one. Their animals are sick, they are upset, and it is more difficult to be objective.

Instead, talk with a veterinarian before or as soon as you get livestock. You are looking for one who has an interest in goats, even if not much knowledge. They need to be interested in helping you learn. The more you know, the better your animals will be cared for.

You need to find out the hours they are available and whether they take after hours calls. The latter is important because livestock don't always tend to get sick or have problems between 8 and 5 Monday through Friday.

Find out if they make farm calls or if they expect you to bring your animals to their clinic. More veterinarians want animals to be brought to a clinic because they have the needed facilities and equipment. Animals may be easier to treat and are in a setting that often allows for better and quicker healing.

Finally, you need to ask about fee structure. This prevents surprises on both ends.

Whatever you do though, don't wait until you have an emergency! One reason some producers have a problem finding a vet to work with them, is that they never call except in an emergency.

Where to Find a Veterinarian

There are different ways to find a veterinarian to work with you and your goats. The first and probably best source is local farmers who also raise goats. This also allows you to meet other goat producers. Local clubs, such as 4H and goat associations, are an easy way to find these goat producers. County Cooperative Extension Service and county Natural Resources Conservation Service offices (NRCS) can help you locate these farmers and these clubs. There are two websites that have listings of veterinarians who are interested in working with goat producers. The first one is the website for the American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners, www.aasrp.org. The other website is the Cybergoat website and the location for the listing of vets is www.cybergoat.com/goat_vet.htm. The
Maryland Small Ruminant page is another good website. While not having any veterinary listings, it, along with the other two websites, is good sources of information for veterinarians and producers alike.

Once again, the most important thing is to find one!

**Schedule a Farm Visit**

You need to schedule a farm visit with the veterinarian you wish to use. There are several reasons to do this. You are allowing the veterinarian to see your operation. This enables them to understand your management priorities and to determine your strengths and weaknesses. In order for you to have a good working relationship, the vet needs to know what your goals are, how you expect your animals to be treated and to know where they may need to help you the most.

Scheduling a farm visit lets the vet view your farm in a calm setting before there something happens that requires attention. It also allows you both to get to know one another.

Ideally you should schedule a farm visit one to four times a year. Many times the veterinarian will notice something during these visits that will just help your operation. It's easy to miss things when you see your own animals every day. Even though something may not be causing a problem at the time, later on it might.

**What Does a Veterinarian Provide that You Need**

Many goat producers have never raised goats before and sometimes have never raised livestock. A food animal veterinarian will be able to help you with basic animal husbandry practices along with assisting you in determining your livestock management priorities. A knowledge of basic animal husbandry will prevent many health problems.

New producers especially will need basic animal health care from their vet. The vet can and should be willing to provide training in routine tasks such as vaccinations. Animal wellness programs are important to get set up. They will include vaccination and parasite programs, but should also include stress prevention and other ways to keep animals healthy. Some veterinarians can also help with nutritional problems, and setting up a nutritional program.

Sooner or later, producers will have a sick animal. While the goal is to keep these to a minimum, having a vet to call on for treatment of sick animals is essential. Some producers only call on a vet after hours with an emergency. These are the ones who often complain the most about having trouble finding a vet to work with them. There may be some veterinarians who don't mind being called for emergencies only, but this needs to be determined ahead of time. Most producers will find that a veterinarian is much more likely and willing to help them in an emergency if they also have relationship with the producer in non-emergency times. It's important to think about your expectations of your vet and decide if they are realistic or not.

**What will you provide your veterinarian**

It's very important when calling a veterinarian about a sick animal to have as much information about the animal as possible. This will help the vet to determine the best course of action. If you don't
have this information, you may have to get the information and call the vet back. This wastes time needlessly. The information to have ready to tell your vet includes:

- Eating
- Drinking
- Ruminating
- Urinating/defecating
- Temperature
- How long signs have been going on
- Treatment already tried

Having this information available also helps you, the producer, learn to observe your animals. Observation is the key to healthy animals.

If your vet decides it is best to come out to examine and treat the animal, save time and frustration by having the animal easily accessible with good working conditions. This also holds true with working the whole herd of animals. Don't wait until the vet gets there to get the animals up and to round up needed equipment.

A sick animal will need to be in a dry and well-lit place. Have warm water available for handwashing. Providing these things will make it a more pleasant experience for everyone.

**Emergency Situations**

We all hope we don't ever have an emergency situation but it's best to plan for the time that one may occur. First of all, it's important for you to decide what you can handle and what you can't. Everyone has different levels of experience and different comfort levels. When a situation reaches the point that you think you can't handle it, call as soon as possible. Do not wait. It's human nature to hope that things will get better, but many times things don't get better. It's easier to deal with a situation while it's still light, than to wait later into the night. This is certainly true during bad weather.

Finally, having the facilities and equipment listed above are even more important in an emergency situation. Having a plan in place will keep things calmer at a time when everyone is more stressed.

**Veterinarians unfamiliar with goats**

If your veterinarian has an interest in goats, but not enough knowledge, there are many places for them to go for more information. The American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners is a professional veterinary association for those interested in sheep, goats, llamas, and other small ruminants. Membership includes a quarterly newsletter as well as a professional listserv. It is a wonderful association for a veterinarian, giving access to small ruminant experts around the world.

Two textbooks that are available are Sheep Medicine by Mary Smith, D.V.M. and Sheep and Goat Medicine, by D.G. Pugh, D.V.M. A good farmer friendly book, which is also good for veterinarians interested in pasture based systems, is Small Scale Livestock Farming by Carol Ekarius. See the resource list at the end of this article.
Many producers will purchase these books for their vets to help them learn more about small ruminants. There are also professional meetings available for veterinarians interested in learning more about small ruminants.

**When to Call Your Vet**

One of the more difficult decisions producers have to make is when to actually call the vet. Some will call at the first sign of any trouble, but many others wait until it's too late. There are many reasons for this, but probably the most important one is that they just don't know how to tell if one of their animals is sick.

To be able to tell when an animal is sick, you must first spend time observing your animals. People buy livestock because they like them. But they too often get caught up in doing things and fail to realize that they need to spend time just being with and watching their animals. Twenty or thirty minutes daily just being out with their animals will teach a producer more about their animals than all the books and all the talking with others can do. After spending time doing this, you will be able to tell when one of your animals isn't acting quite right. Continuing to observe that animal may be all that is needed. But if things don't get better quickly, it's best to call the vet then, rather than waiting until the animal might become seriously ill.

**Listservs**

A brief word about listservs. There are many listservs available on goats, and more seem to start every week. Listservs can be a great thing. There are many people writing on them who know a lot and are willing to share their knowledge. But they can also be a terrible thing. For every knowledgeable person sending messages, there are two more who send misleading or just plain wrong information. Conditions and diseases that are rarely seen by most producers become magnified when posted on a listserv. This causes unnecessary anxiety in many producers, especially if they have few people locally they can turn to.

Too many producers turn to listservs instead of calling a vet. No one can tell anything about an animal or the farm it is being raised on over the Internet. It can be dangerous to rely solely on a listserv for your veterinary care. The listservs can be useful to learn about different aspects of goat production. Talking to others about experiences is also useful. Just be very careful of how much emphasis you place on what you read on a listserv. Knowing your farm and your animals is the crucial element to determining the validity of issues discussed on a listserv.

**Conclusion**

A veterinarian can help a goat producer to achieve their goals. It's important to find one you can work with. Veterinarians have chosen this profession because they like animals. But they are also in business to make money. You can help them to help you by treating them in a businesslike manner. This will foster a good working relationship that will benefit both you and your vet.

**Resources**

Smith, Mary. 1994. Goat medicine. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. 620 pages
The proper citation for this article is: