

Attaining and retaining small ruminant clients

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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to aid bovine practitioners and clinic owners in expanding their practice to include small ruminant clients as well as how to service them to keep them as returning and valued clients. We will review what makes small ruminant clientele as well as the animals themselves, different to cattle clients and patients.

Key words: small ruminant clientele, SEO, small ruminant, sheep, goat, differences between cattle and goats

State of the industry

There are a lot of clients that are in desperate need of small ruminant care. This industry is incredibly diverse and dynamic. The kinds of people who choose to own sheep and goats use them in a great variety of ways; milk, meat, fiber, packing, weed management, education, show, breeding, sale, exhibition, as well as pets. The nature of small ruminants makes them a great option for people who want a taste of farming with low input or low cost. They are smaller, eat less, take up less space and are generally cheaper to acquire. There has been a large surge of sheep and goat ownership over the last 10 years that is trending toward pets. Millennials seeking that “homestead” lifestyle, as well as social media, has increased their popularity, especially since Covid.

Word of mouth or referrals from other clients is the most common way clients find clinics. Social media, online message boards, blogs and member groups allow for small ruminant owners to gather and share advice quickly. These clients rely on the internet to aid them in the care and management of their animals.

While online communities that are open and caring are valuable, it can also come with misleading information and dangerous advice. Owning and caring for small ruminants is very individual. From the various uses, to the dramatic differences in breeds, and then also considering the microenvironment of each individual farm, and various outside obligations these clients may have (kids, full-time jobs, other animals, etc.) each individual farm and owner has different needs and going to the internet for generic advice can lead to difficulties.

There is also a general distrust from some older or more experienced owners with veterinarians. The veterinary curriculum is dense and difficult, with the majority of material being focused on small animal companions, horses and cattle. It is no secret that small ruminants – sheep, goat, camelids and cervids – are not a main priority for graduating veterinarians and vet school faculty. As well, there is less economic impact of sheep and goat industries on the economy. Fewer people in the U.S. and Canada eat sheep and goat meat and milk products, as well as being worth less in general per animal. This does create a frustrating gap in research in procedures and pharmaceuticals that can be used in small ruminant medicine and surgery.

So, that puts the industry at a crossroad. We have clients who demand quality medicine from practitioners who have to be self-motivated to learn these species, while having very few resources to guide them, and keep it low cost. It is no wonder many clinics have decided to move away from small ruminant practice to conserve their resources, time and mental strength to cattle, equines and small animals.

However, if we want to see the lives of our sheep and goat friends improved, as well as continue to nurture the agriculturalists of the future, we need to have individuals who are self-motivated and curious enough to go against the grain and pursue these patients with as much support as possible. Plus, this is a largely untapped industry with opportunities to increase your clientele without having to increase your practice area.

Small ruminant client survey (unpublished)

Through a self-written survey, I was able to reach a very small group of small ruminant clients (n = 42) from the eastern and midwest U.S. to ask their anonymous opinion on their experiences with small ruminant veterinarians. I believe there is a greater need for research into this area so that we can glean insight into how to service these clients better and what veterinarians can do to support this industry without burning out.

The main takeaways of the survey showed that clients are hungry for knowledge, they want more veterinarians in the industry, and to me offered similar services as those offered to cattle and horses. They want affordable care, as well as mobile service with veterinarians that care about their animals. These clients are frustrated by the law changes regarding prescription medications, and believe this greatly hurts “small farms and homesteads”. They are frustrated that veterinarians who like, know about, and are willing to treat small ruminant patients, are few and far between. What they do offer is deep gratitude for those of us who show up. They want to build solid VCPRs and want their concerns to be heard.

Getting seen

Your clinic’s online presence and social media interactions are important. Not just to be fun and cute, but to be “googlable”. SEO is key to being successfully found when clients are trying to find a vet. This is also why they get frustrated and turn to the message boards and owner groups. They can’t find us online. Word of mouth and referrals from trusted colleagues are how the majority of clients get a clinic’s name and number. Clients use very different terminology than veterinarians do. Even the word “ruminant” is vastly not understood. Practitioners who are interested in increasing the number of small ruminants they see should acknowledge these facts and implement changes into their website and social media posts. Include words like “goat or sheep vet” or “pet sheep and goats”.

Retaining small ruminant clients can also be a challenge to a practitioner who may not have confidence in their abilities to handle small ruminant cases. While clients want vets who know about sheep and goats, vets want clients who know about how to care for sheep and goats. Client education is hugely important but is harder to “bill for” and therefore is often neglected. The diversity of the industry makes it difficult to make generic recommendations for all farms/cases. What works in one part of the world, does not mean it is appropriate for this farm.

What is different about small ruminant medicine vs. cattle?

Small ruminants are not just small cows. While being a ruminant is similar, there are many differences that clinicians who are unfamiliar should take into consideration. This list is not exhaustive, but includes some of the obvious and relevant differences.

Use of Extra-Label Drug Use (ELDU)

- More “pet” potential
- Disbudding very early and castration much later
- Risk of urinary calculi
- Parasite management
- Seasonal breeding (Long day breeders)
- Larger litters and shorter gestations

The largest hurdle from moving between bovine medicine to small ruminants is the severe lack of drugs on label for sheep, and even fewer for goats. As food animal veterinarians, we have an obligation to adhere to strict safe milk and meat practices, and pride ourselves on being the liaison between safe food and healthy animals. Goats and sheep are considered food animals in the US. With that distinction comes severe penalties to finding drug residues in the human food chain. With so few drugs on label, we must rely on research, FARAD and our peers to guide us on ELDUs that are safe and effective, and attempt judicious use, of not only antibiotics, but of all our medications.

Given that fact, these species are often being “used” as companions and pets. Clients have the best intentions of never having these animals go to the food chain, or even treated any less than a member of the family. However, we dance a razor thin line between doing our best medicine, keeping our actions legal, keeping clients happy, and consumers safe. The best way to attempt to handle these situations is with documentation, excellent ID management, and client education. We should not let our clients bully us into uncomfortable situations, but it is easy to sympathize with people over beloved pets.

Disbudding of goat kids occurs much earlier in life (between 5 and 14 days of life). These kids have much smaller body weights and thinner skulls, but an increased sensitivity to our sedatives and blocks. This makes this procedure riskier and in need of an experienced facilitator. There has actually been some excellent research that has been dedicated to this particular subject leading the AASRP to post specific guidelines on this, and some other “welfare” based topics. The guideline outlines the use of cautery (hot iron) disbudding between 5-14 days of age, following at least two of the three following methods of pain reduction – oral meloxicam at 1 mg/kg once, a two-point cornual nerve block or ring block with lidocaine diluted 1:1 with sterile water, and sedation of clinician’s preference.

There is also a higher risk of urinary calculi causing urinary blockage in male small ruminants. These cases bring poor prognosis because of the chronic nature of them as well as the anatomy of the male ruminant reproductive system. The medical intervention or surgical correction are time consuming, expensive and do not guarantee that reblocking or euthanasia will not still be the end result. As well as being difficult to manage on a farm. Veterinary surgeons have moved away from perineal urethrostomy and are more likely to suggest tube cystotomy. The nature of the “pet” lifestyle and diet have been blamed for causing a 4X risk to these pets over other small ruminant patients.

Parasite management is also a very large topic in small ruminant management, and may be one of the largest areas of misconception and frustration from owners. Barber pole worm (*Haemonchus contortus*) and meningeal worm (*Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*) are the two major areas of concern. There is not only individual animal susceptibility, but geographical difficulties with these parasites and their ever-growing resistance to our anthelmintics. The small ruminant community have been pursuing alternative methods to chemical dewormers in an effort to keep the upper hand on these parasites. There has been promising research in pasture rotation, sericea lespedeza species of grass, and fungal nutritional additives. More information regarding these methods can be found on the American Consortium for Small Ruminant Parasite Control website.

The last major difference from cattle medicine that will be addressed here is the reproductive differences between cattle and sheep/goats. These species are long-day seasonal breeders as well as have shorter gestation periods. The fetal growth in the third trimester plus the higher likelihood of multiple fetuses, puts small ruminants at risk of pregnancy toxemia, ketosis, during gestation instead of leaving the greatest risk to be post-partum like in cattle. C-sections are technically the same except the dramatic friability difference in the uterus of the sheep or goat. Dystocias can be nearly impossible to correct due to the very small size of the doe/ewe as well as the increased friability of the uterus.

Conclusion

While this presentation only scratches the surface as to the nuances between bovine and ovine/caprine practice, we have covered some common topics that this author believes are “must knows” before setting foot on a client’s farm. The industry is in dire need of more veterinarians that are not only trained in small ruminant medicine and surgery, but are enthusiastic about it. Clinics and practitioners should be considering whether it is possible for them to open their truck doors to small ruminants as a way to meet the needs of these animals and to support the communities in which we live.

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