



Caring for cows around the globe

I JUST returned home after a two-week “sabbatical” in Europe. During that time, I attended “Cow Signals/People Signals,” a concentrated training session on how to optimize dairy cow health and sustainability.

I spent the training with 13 individuals who shared common interests in the dairy industry. Representing nine different countries, these people gave me a broader perspective on how other regions of the world manage their herds. It was an incredible learning experience for all of us.

Take a step back

My trip was planned following a visit with Joep Driessen, a dairy veterinarian whom I had the pleasure of meeting at the 2015 National Mastitis Council Annual Meeting. I was immediately impressed as I listened to his presentation on “Cow Signals/People Signals,” a program that he and his colleagues have developed in the Netherlands. His group has a passion for the dairy industry, and they understand that people skills are as essential as cow skills on well-managed farms.

Upon arriving to the training center, I was greeted by the other “students,” a super bunch of individuals who were just as fired up about the week as I was. This class consisted of nutritionists, fellow veterinarians, those connected to dairy support industries and others involved in academia. We were also fortunate to have a couple of individuals who currently farm.

It became rapidly apparent, as we visited farms and discussed dairy issues, that the power of shared observation was very important. Sometimes it is refreshing to drop the “binoculars” and look at the big picture. We learned to focus first on observing the herd from a distance. We then moved in more closely to observe cow comfort, walkways,

traffic patterns and so forth.

Finally, we zeroed in on individual cow observations (body condition, posture, overall cleanliness, rumen fill and so forth). Our group individually documented what we observed and then came together to discuss the positives along with the areas that needed further attention.

Throughout the farm visits and the classroom experience, we developed a camaraderie among us. I believe that has developed into lasting friendships.

The learning doesn't stop

The rest of my stay in Europe was shared with my wife, Jane. That, too, was an adventurous, and at times, hair-raising journey for us as we wound around the countryside of some of the most beautiful landscapes we've ever seen.

We were greeted with warm welcomes nearly every stop along our journey. The language barrier was not so challenging, as many folks were willing to speak English. We ate all of our meals with locals or other fellow tourists, sharing conversations of the beauty of the countryside. And, at numerous times, the conversations drifted to include the farmland dotted with contented Holsteins grazing on lush sloped pastures or Brown Swiss meandering alongside the narrow country lanes with their cow bells clanging.

These people provided much-needed information regarding directions and points of interest, along with warm hearty fellowship. Contact information was shared, photos taken and sincere “enjoy your stay” handshakes made us feel very welcome.

Cows, cows everywhere

Amsterdam has a population of almost 800,000 people. The congestion of driving out of Schiphol Airport near the city was slightly overwhelming. But just a few miles out of the

city, we were welcomed by numerous herds of Holsteins, grazing only feet from the expressway.

During our training period, we visited a number of great dairies that allowed me to get my “cow fix.” We also had the opportunity to visit some family members of a current client of mine. Patrick and I did a walking tour of his farm. Learning how he manages his herd in the Netherlands gave me a broader perspective on how slight differences in management make farms work for particular regions of the world. Many of our clients who have relocated to Michigan have had a long history in the dairy business and brought with them skills learned from generations of farming in Europe. Great people with good cows greeted us at every stop.

Following our stay in the Netherlands, Jane and I departed for a loop that included Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France. Although time did not allow for a close look at individual farms, we were impressed with the diverse dairies in these regions. I was not expecting to see so many farms with grazing cows wandering up the steep hillsides or literally grazing feet from the roadsides.

With all the incredible scenery around us, my driving skills lacked a bit as I would try to “zero in” on Holsteins, Brown Swiss or Charolais, causing a measure of concern with my wife. But renting a “stick shift” car kept me in the driver's seat and in control of things! Even though the back country lanes were half as wide as our roads, I only jumped a curb once and hit another car's side-view mirror — not bad for a rookie European driver, I'd say!

Common goals in the end

I now have had time to ponder all that we saw and heard from others in the dairy industry in that region

of Europe. As expected, the current economic situation is fairly global in nature. The disappearance of the quota has been countered by more restrictive government regulations, particularly on environmental policy. It was apparent that dairy producers, within their regions, have developed products to reach niche markets, such as specialty cheeses and yogurts. Many producers also have turned to technology, such as robotic milking, auto feeders for calves and cow monitoring systems, to augment on-farm labor.

At the end of the day, sustainability and how we choose to accomplish that is the key. Regardless of where the cows are cared for, continued improvements in dairy management and cow health will enable our lactating mammals to thrive.

Things are different in Europe, and that is one of the reasons to visit it. Cow nurturing is just as much of a passion there as it is here, only it comes with a different management style to reach this common goal of dairy sustainability.

We left Europe more open-minded on how people live slightly differently from us but who wouldn't trade their lives for ours. They've made it work for them, just as we strive to do here at home for us. We met hard-working, intelligent people who had no reservations in engaging in hearty conversation, whether in farming or in politics. It was a great adventure, and we're already in full discussion on where the road will take us next time!

The author is a partner and large animal veterinarian at Thumb Veterinary Services in Decker-ville, Mich.

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