

Homeopathy on the Farm

By Anne Lazor

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After homesteading and building a small farm for years using organic practices, we got officially certified in 1989 as the second dairy farm in Vermont to be certified organic. At this time there were no precedents established for organic standards in dairy farming. Two small dairies wrote the rules according to what we thought was significant and feasible for organic dairy. Soil fertility and mineralization were the foundation. Alternatives in health practices, self sufficiency in feed production - through intensive grazing and/or raising organic grain crops were primary focuses. Although we set the standards to allow for the use of antibiotics in life or death situations, the challenge was to find other ways to treat cows¹ ailments. Initially, we found a probiotic, ID-1, derived from colostrum whey. We used this extensively for mastitis, and determined it to be useful for many streptococcus mastitis cases, but not for E.coli or Staph. aureus mastitis. For cases of ketosis and as a preventative to milk fever when cows freshened we used a ³strengthening medicine² called Nutri-lac which was a combination of fermented molasses, acidophilus, and minerals. We also used liberal amounts of epsom salts for drenches and topical applications for all maladies, the idea being that magnesium was a key element in restoring health.

In 1991, NOFA-VT sponsored Dr. Ed Sheaffer to come and make a presentation on veterinary homeopathy. This opened up a whole new outlook on healing and health . In this more holistic approach, identifying a bacterial infection or disease is secondary to observing the individual's particular response to the disease, including the physiological, emotional, and mental response. This is a reversal of conventional medical diagnostic thinking. Learning homeopathy involves not only a new approach to observation and diagnosis but also a long term process of becoming familiar with the materia medica (variety of possible medicines) used to cure various combinations of symptoms. Since homeopathy for animals uses the same medicine as those used for humans, classes in human homeopathy prove useful in learning the concepts and the medicines , and can be surprisingly useful working with animals. The challenge in adapting homeopathy to a herd of dairy cows is in making the observations and ³taking a case². Cows are not overly expressive in describing where it hurts, what kind of pain, what makes it better, etc.

But working closely with them, one becomes familiar with individual personalities and range of normal (healthy) behavior, so that irritability and discomfort are noticeable. Loss of appetite, cold or droopy ears are also easily observed and often accompany illnesses in cows. In fact, some symptoms of illness are so common that they don't help much in determining the appropriate homeopathic medicine (like headaches in humans). Sometimes a conventional veterinarian can add new insights with a simple physical exam, checking heart, lungs, digestive and reproductive systems. However, once the veterinarian is in the barn, it is often difficult to get diagnosis without treatment, or get information that is not already synthesized into diagnosis that may scare the farmer into accepting conventional treatment. It can be a leap of faith to have a cow diagnosed with pneumonia and then send the veterinarian away and take on the responsibility of finding the homeopathic medicine that will turn the cow around towards recovery.

Over the years we have been caught in this bind a number of times. Depending on how confident (this is as much a measure of our own energy level) we feel about our abilities to take on the responsibility of treatment, we have occasionally used some conventional veterinary treatments, such as IV hypersaline, dextrose and calcium with varying success.

Some treatments, such as hypersaline, seem to add more stress to an individual that is already out of balance. We experienced this with a cow several years ago. The cow was off feed, feverish, and had a hard quarter.

The veterinarian diagnosed her illness as coliform mastitis and gave her IV hypersaline. After the treatment the cow became listless, lay down, and gave up. She would not drink or eat and died within 24 hours. Hypersaline is used by veterinarians to flush toxins out of a cow's system. A heavy dose of salt injected into the blood stream makes the cow thirsty. She drinks large amounts of water which flushes through her body, drawing the toxins out with the urine. Since there are no antibiotics involved, this is one treatment conventional veterinarians may use on organic farms to treat cows with toxic conditions. When the cow does her part, this treatment may be useful. Our experience with hypersaline served as a turning point in our outlook on conventional veterinary medicine. Since then, we have called the veterinarian for a diagnosis, but we have become much more selective (and assertive) concerning the treatment.

A few months after losing the cow, we had another cow off feed, running a fever of 107f, with one hard quarter. She appeared a little anxious or uncomfortable. We gave her homeopathic Aconite 30x every half hour for six doses. By the sixth dose, around 10:30 PM, her temperature was 105f. The following morning, her temperature was normal, she was eating, and the quarter cleared out within a day.

We have had similar experiences treating cows with digestive disturbances. Cows that lost interest in grain but continued to eat forage have regained their appetites and milk production after doses of homeopathic Lycopodium 1m or Nux Vomica 30x. Cows with reproductive problems have also responded to homeopathic treatment. A cow with silent heats treated with Pulsatilla 200c came into full standing heat within 21 days. A cystic cow was given Apis 30x. Shortly thereafter, she came into heat and was bred back successfully.

The great challenge of treating animals with homeopathic medicine is in determining the appropriate medicine for the animal. Each cow has a unique system which may indicate a different remedy for the same ailment. Close observation of the cow's behavior and symptoms is necessary to treat homeopathically.

Not all our treatments have been totally successful. I have come to accept the reality of a few "three teater" cows and cows with lumps of scar tissue in the udder, although over time many of these problems resolve themselves. Scar tissue disappears; previously infected quarters are once again productive in the next lactation.

Homeopathy has proved very effective on our farm, but we do not consider it an end in itself. We look to the whole farm environment as the basis for animal health and well-being. Fresh air, exercise, good legume/grass pasture in summer, and good legume/grass forage in winter, grown

on healthy living soil, are all important contributors to herd health. We consider good bacteria to be our best allies in this process. Good soil bacteria help make nutrients available to the plants; good rumen bacteria help make nutrients available to the cow; good lactic bacteria make the yogurt more digestible for the people.

Unfortunately, not all the bacteria in our environment are beneficial. Working with the SARE group gave us a new awareness of the less beneficial bacteria present in our environment, thereby adding a new perspective on the issues of milking procedures and udder health. Taking samples of each quarter's milk from each cow at freshening, dry-off, and in cases of clinical mastitis, gave us information about the kinds of bacteria inhabiting our barn and cows. Knowing that some cows were testing positive for Staph Aureus, even though their somatic cell counts were not high, gave us the opportunity to milk those cows last and alerted us to the facility with which Staph Aureus migrates through external skin irritations and injuries to take up residence in a cow's udder. Encouragement and research results shared by Woody Panky from the UVM Milk Quality Research Lab convinced us to pre-dip and post-dip cows' teats during milking. Woody's input also encouraged optimum management of the cow's environment –using bedding under the cows that kept udders dry, i.e. mixing kiln-dried sawdust in with our homegrown straw. We also checked the barn for stray voltage to reduce any stress from that source.

Working to keep animals healthy is working to keep them in balance - through good nutrition, fresh air, exercise, etc. I have come to make management decisions and choose treatments as much on the basis of how they affect the cows' total balance and long term health, as on their short term effect. Likewise, the cows' balance is integral with the balance of the whole farm. We must strive to see the whole picture in building a healthy organic farm.