



Bellwether Magazine

Volume 1
Number 4 *Summer 1982*

Article 2

7-1-1982

Veterinary Economics

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Bellwether

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University of Pennsylvania

Summer 1982

Veterinary Economics

The farmer plays a vital role in our economy as a supplier of food for the nation. Obviously, a healthy farm economy is dependent on healthy crops and food production animals. The veterinarian is indispensable to farmers in their attempt to maintain a healthy economy. In a very broad sense, veterinary economics is Dr. John Fetrow's specialization.

A field service veterinarian and a member of the teaching staff at New Bolton Center, Dr. Fetrow sees economics as playing an increasingly important role in the treatment of herd

animal diseases and in research for better ways to maintain herd health.

Dr. Fetrow looks at disease from both clinical and business points of view. As a veterinarian, he is naturally concerned with the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of diseases in food production animals, primarily in the dairy industry, his specialty. From a business standpoint, he evaluates the economic impact of disease on the farmer's livelihood. As the number of farms decrease and the methods of raising food production animals become more sophisticated, the economics of disease prevention and herd health maintenance becomes a paramount concern for the veterinarian and the basis for continuing research.

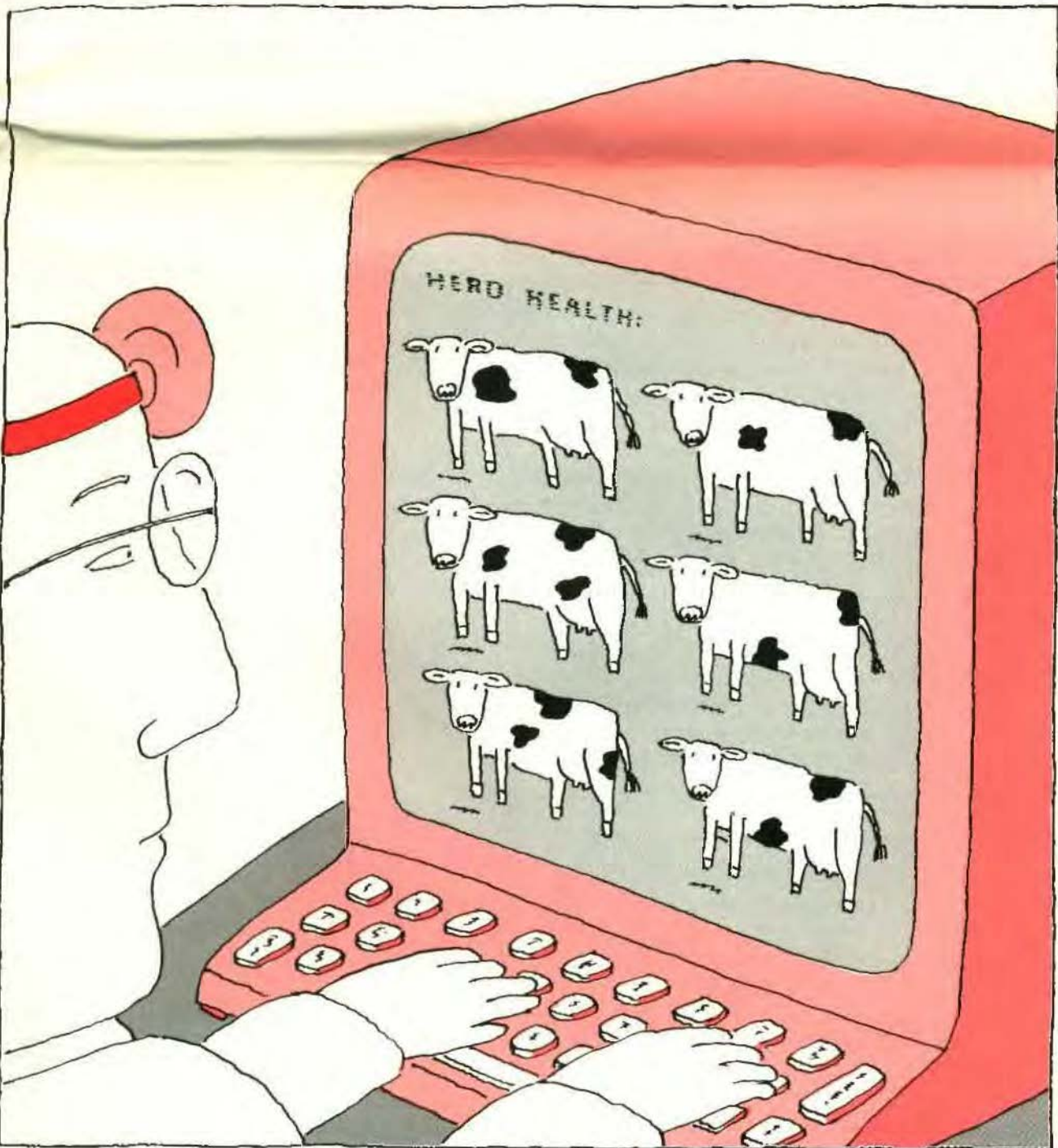
"For farmers to get the highest return on their investments, it is critical for them to keep their animals healthy, producing milk and meat to meet the demands of the consumer market," explained Dr. Fetrow. "Today's farmer does this in the most cost-effective way possible. While certain diseases of epidemic proportion can devastate a farmer's herd, other diseases of a sub-clinical variety can also affect an animal's production. Curing the problem is not enough; we have to look at the causes and practice preventative medicine."

Parasites, mastitis, and even diseases of the hoof are examples of illness that can throw an animal off its feed, thus affecting its production. In many cases, the cause of the problem is difficult to detect since the animal appears to be healthy, but is not producing as it should. "As I tell my students, curing a common disorder in a cow is only useful if you can prevent it from occurring in the future. While the economic impact of disease is costly, so is research. Essentially, animal disease and death are measured in dollar terms," he added.

Dr. Fetrow teaches two courses, "Animal Health Economy," a first-semester elective, followed by "Production System Economy." In both, he incorporates microeconomic theory. "We look at all aspects of food production and at the economics of the agricultural management system in the dairy, beef, veal, swine, sheep, poultry, and equine industries. We're also concerned with the breeding and farrowing industries and the methods employed to produce healthy offspring. I also tell the students how little money they're going to make as a practicing veterinarian," he said laughingly.

According to Dr. Fetrow, the practice of veterinary medicine over the years had a "seat-of-the-pants" approach. The philosophy was to diagnose it and fix it. But today more than

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Veterinary Economics

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ever before, the emphasis is on disease prevention and health maintenance at whatever cost. Along with medical research, the key to prevention may mean a complete upheaval of the traditional methods of raising food production animals. "Factory farming," a term applied to modern farming machinations, is a concept that is being simultaneously praised and vehemently opposed.

Growing up on a Maryland poultry farm where the eggs rolled off the assembly line, Dr. Fetrow is a dispassionate defender of cost-effective farming methods. On factory farms, animals have restricted freedom, are raised in close confinement, often indoors under artificially controlled environments. It is an issue that has also espoused an animal rights cause.

"There is no question that factory farming is the way for individual farmers to turn, not only as a more efficient and cost-effective means of raising food animals, but as the most efficient vehicle for feeding people in the long run," Fetrow contended. "There is too much romanticism - an idyllic view of farm animals grazing in green pastures. It is a view we can no longer afford in light of a declining farm population. Ultimately, animal rights must be weighed against human rights and our obligation to feed people in the world. We can only do this through the most efficient system of producing food for the market."

Dr. Fetrow, who is also the veterinarian for a local swine farrowing facility where the sows and piglets are kept in farrowing crates which don't permit the sows to roll over, maintains such facilities actually contribute to healthier animals. "The so-called inhumanity claim is not the fault of the production system, rather, it lies with the consumers who demand anemic white pork for their dinner. The pork producer is caught in the middle of satisfying a demand for the product. It's the individual you have to re-educate," said Dr. Fetrow, who added that he is, however, opposed to conditions that are stressful and destructive to the animals, an effect that is counter-productive.

Production at New Bolton Center is another area of concern to Dr. Fetrow, who said that the business operations of the large animal facility have been done in the "green eyeshade world" too long. Soon the business operations will go "on line" as computers assume the tasks of billing, accounting, medical and laboratory records maintenance, and other business functions. "We were fortunate to find a donor to fund New Bolton Center's step into the computer age," he said. "I've been pushing for computers here for years, but money was a factor." The next step involved selecting the appropriate computer system to handle the diverse functions at New Bolton Center. Dr. Fetrow said he stumbled on a company that developed a computer language called "Metalife," that allows for great user capability. He is in the process of implementing a word processing system and hopes to establish an intelligent computer users network in the near future. "Word processing will save repetition and eliminate a lot of drudgery for the secretaries," he said. "It will have a tremendous impact on teaching and research reports. A paper that requires a paragraph change won't have to be completely retyped. It will also help us write better grant proposals."

Computerizing the business of the hospital will streamline the various functions that are now laboriously done by hand. Functions like admissions, discharges, clinician follow-up, pharmacy, pending laboratory work, and other information will be programmed into the system and provide a printout of pertinent data for every clinician and others who have a need to know. Medical records can be stored for call-up as needed. "My objective is to build a system that a relatively computer-naive person can use," explained Dr. Fetrow. "Eventually, students will work with the computers too.



Dr. John Fetrow

The machines will be able to 'speak to one another,' from the front desk to medical records, for example," he added. "Instead of feet and fingers, we'll communicate via flying electrons."

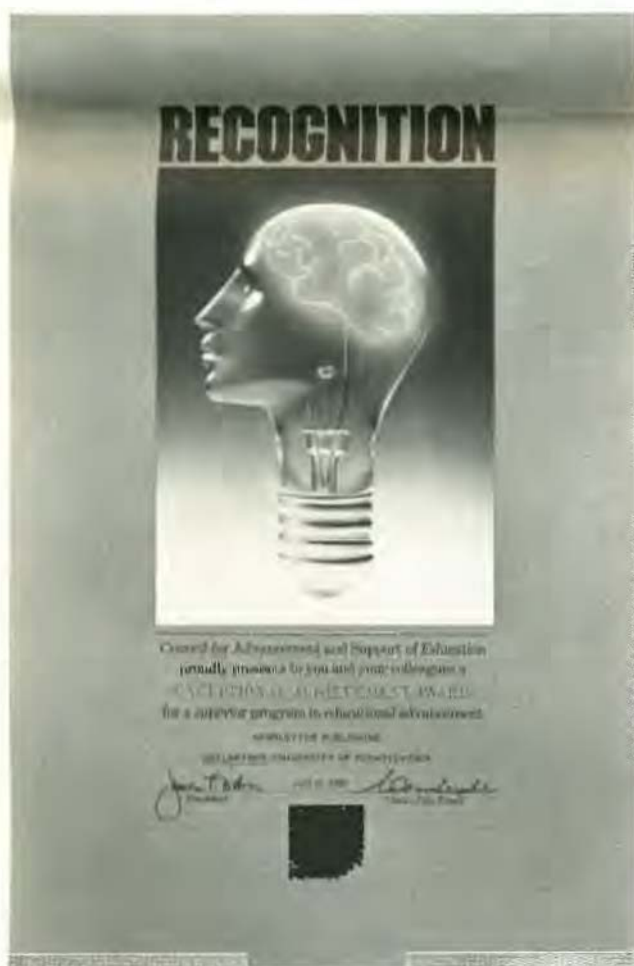
Dr. Fetrow hopes to have New Bolton Center's business functions computerized in six months and will implement the system that will utilize four desk-top terminals. Word processing is currently being introduced and it is hoped that it will be functioning on its own within two months. Noting that medical records is the most complex task, he estimates that it will take at least a year to computerize this operation. Aside from New Bolton Center's business operations, Dr. Fetrow forsee the possibility of keeping herd records for farmers and even computerizing the client's entire business operation, which might, for instance, be kept in the veterinarian's office. "Computers are a wave of the future that I want to be a part of," he said, adding that computers will greatly facilitate the practicing veterinarian's record-keeping as well.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Dr. Fetrow carried a double major in biology and German literature. He spent his junior year in Germany reviewing his career options. After working for a veterinarian one summer, he decided that he would like to pursue a career in the field. He received a B.S. in biology in 1973, then entered the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, earning a V.M.D. in 1977. Dr. Fetrow balanced out his technical education with an M.B.A. from the Wharton School in 1981.

On the New Bolton Center faculty for five years, Dr. Fetrow, 30, is the youngest person to receive the Norden Award for Distinguished Teaching, an honor he is "very proud of." Soon there will be two veterinarians in the family. Dr. Fetrow's wife, Susan Crane, graduates from Veterinary School this spring and plans to establish a small animal and equine practice. The couple live in Westtown in Chester County.

As a field service veterinarian, Dr. Fetrow makes a lot of "house calls," so catching up on lost sleep is one of his at-home priorities, along with conversation with Susan. He also does a little woodworking, some non-medical reading, and plays squash once a week.

Bellwether Award



The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) sponsors an annual competition that involves hundreds of higher education institutions. This past Spring, *Bellwether* received an Exceptional Achievement Award in the Newsletter Publishing category of this competition.