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BY KATHERINE UNGER BAILLIE



It's a quaint image: a rural vet in a pick-up truck driving down a country lane to treat a sick cow or horse.

Charming though this depiction may be, it belies the thoroughly modern nature of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine's Field Service. While the nine veterinarians who comprise the Field Service still function as the "old country vets" for the local community, aspects of their practice — including advanced diagnostic services, dairy-production medicine and even acupuncture — bring the Service squarely into the 21st century.

Operating out of Penn Vet's New Bolton Center in Chester County, Field Service has provided preventive, routine and emergency care to large animals within a 30-mile radius of the campus since 1956. Each year, the Service sees approximately 20,000 cows, 6,000 horses and an assortment of other animals, from llamas to goats.

Back in the 1950s, Field Service vets were generalists. But following a trend in the field of veterinary medicine, most of Penn's Field Service vets are specialized by species today and have advanced training in areas such as internal medicine, sports medicine, preventive medicine and milk quality.

"Most of our equine vets just look at horses and most of our food-animal vets just look at food animals," said Michaela Kristula, DVM, MS, section chief of the Field Service and an associate professor of medicine in Field Service for Penn Vet. These specialties serve the vets well in Chester County, a wealthy, rural area home to discerning clients that include world-class equestrians and progressive family-owned dairy farms.

On the food-animal side, the Field Service cares for cattle at roughly 18 dairy farms and 15 beef farms. Some of these are small operations, producing ice cream, cheese or meat for local markets, while others are large dairies with as many as 800 cows. At these farms, vets work proactively to ensure that herds stay healthy and productive.

"We work with the farms to establish protocols so they can identify disease early and maximize treatment

success," Dr. Kristula said. "We're really focused on promoting health."

Last year, for example, Field Service was called to a dairy farm that was having a problem in the herd. A referring vet had diagnosed widespread mastitis, an infection of the udders that reduces milk quality. When Penn's vets visited, they noticed that the cows were very uncomfortable when they were being milked and that their teats were sore and swollen.

Field Service vets traced the problem to the set-up of the milking parlor and recommended that the farm operators make adjustments to the milking equipment. Their suggestions improved teat and udder health and resulted in improved milk quality.

"The cows were comfortable and the owner was very pleased," Dr. Kristula said. "It's really a win-win situation, because if the animals are healthy they give more milk and that affects the farmer's bottom line."

Field Service vets must pay keen attention to economics when caring for food animals, Dr. Kristula said.

"Ultimately, whatever recommendations you make have to pay for themselves in either milk or meat."

When treating horses, on the other hand, economic constraints tend to be different, and diagnostics can be extremely high-tech. Indeed, some of the diagnostics that Field Service veterinarians utilize on pet horses and performance horses resemble advanced human health care and include digital imaging, ultrasound and endoscopy.

According to Dr. Kristula, who has been with the Field Service since 1984, there is a "unique longevity" to many of the Service's clients.

"We've seen farms passed from one generation to another, and many have been with us on the dairy side and the equine side since we started in the 1950s," Dr. Kristula said. "I guess it's pretty old fashioned, but we don't have a Facebook site, we don't do any social media. In the end it's really the relationships that you develop with people as to why they keep using you." 🍷