

HEALTH TIES



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Story & photos by Troy Smith, field editor

Veterinary-client-patient relationship, or VCPR. A good many cattle folk may never have heard such a highfalutin phrase until a few years ago. It describes something many of them had, but the technical term for it probably wasn't part of their cow-country lexicon.

That changed a few years ago when new regulations required producers to obtain a prescription-like veterinary feed directive (VFD) in order to use some feed-grade medications. But producers couldn't get a VFD from just any cow doctor; it had to be written by a practitioner with whom the producer had a VCPR.

Additionally, a VCPR is necessary for producers to obtain and use prescription drugs and injectable or water medications in an extra-label fashion. That's how it is right now and Olney, Texas, veterinarian Keelan Lewis expects regulations governing drug use in treating livestock to become more expansive.

"It's not a matter of 'if' there will be more restrictions. It will

happen," Lewis told a producer audience attending Cattlemen's College® during the 2020 Cattle Industry Convention, hosted Feb. 5-7 in San Antonio, Texas. Lewis was joined by client Scott Hand, manager of JX Ranch near Loving, Texas. They agreed that a VCPR — with emphasis on the "relationship" part — will be even more important as increasing regulation heaps more responsibility on the veterinarian and the producer-client.

Defining a VCPR

"How a VCPR is structured defines its value," stated Lewis, "but, if a producer wants a blanket script [for medicines], then I'm not their veterinarian."

Her point was that a veterinarian

can't give *carte blanche* to anyone who walks into the clinic. It's a matter of ethical integrity. It's a legal matter, too. The relationship's technical aspect is pretty well spelled out in state and federal regulations, although many states follow the federal VCPR definition. That definition states that a VCPR exists when:

- ▶ A veterinarian has assumed the responsibility for making medical judgments regarding the health of (an) animal(s) and the need for medical

treatment, and the client (the owner of the animal or animals or other caretaker) has agreed to follow the instructions of the veterinarian;

- ▶ There is sufficient knowledge of the animal(s) by the veterinarian to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the animal(s); and
- ▶ The practicing veterinarian is readily available for follow-up in case of adverse reactions or failure of the regimen of therapy.

The rules further state, "Such a relationship can exist only when the veterinarian has recently seen and is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the animal(s) by virtue of examination of the animal(s), and/or by medically appropriate and timely visits to the premises where the animal(s) are kept."

Lewis said such a relationship does not result when a producer only uses a veterinarian for crisis control. It happens when a vet is valued as a consultant — a part of a producer's advisory team that helps the producer establish production guidelines that promote stewardship and profitability. Rare is the producer who wants a veterinarian to dictate production practices. Rather, they want someone who will help them work toward practical solutions.

"Producers ought to find and use a veterinarian that is good at what they need. A veterinarian's professional interests, abilities and

grasp of technology should match the producer's needs," offered Lewis. "I think a consulting vet should be interested in educating clients."

The client side

Scott Hand believes educational opportunity helped strengthen the relationship JX Ranch shares with Lewis and



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her colleagues. The 500-cow outfit is part of a producer network organized by Lewis. Its 20 members acquire knowledge not only from her, but by sharing experience gained on their individual operations. At the core of it, though, Hand thinks it's the veterinarian's professionalism and practicality that make their veterinary-client relationship what it ought to be.

"Dr. Lewis has the technical knowledge and is forward-thinking, and she has functional production knowledge. She's on our place often and understands our goals. She's routinely involved in our management decisions because she gives valuable, practical advice," said Hand. "She tries hard for us, so we try hard for her."

Hand wishes every producer could foster the same kind of



Scott Hand, manager of JX Ranch, Loving, Texas, says educational opportunity helped strengthen the relationship JX Ranch shares with veterinarian Keelan Lewis and her colleagues.

relationship, explaining how his family and Lewis's have become good friends. It allows for a little good-natured fun — like the time Hand and his crew ran a lone steer in with some heifers that Lewis was palpating for pregnancy.

"She called him 'bred,'" winked Hand. Naw, just kidding. ■

Editor's note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.