Dear Dr. Cook:

I am a practicing veterinarian and a Graduate Student in the Agroecology program here at UW-Madison. My Masters project involved follow-up to a training course for dairy support personnel working with organic dairies, which was conducted by the State Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. As a result of my research, some ways of transmitting knowledge to veterinarians and veterinary students, regarding organic production, have been identified. They are discussed in the accompanying memorandum, and are being submitted to you for consideration in curriculum revision.

Please contact me with any questions or concerns. I look forward to continued discussion on this topic.

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cc: Linda Sullivan, DVM  
Chris Olsen, DVM, PhD  
Brent H. McCown, PhD
Memorandum

To:       Nigel Cook, BVSc, MRCVS
           Chair, Food Animal Curriculum Task Force
           University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine

From:    Martha J. Rideout, DVM
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           University of Wisconsin - Madison

Subject: Inclusion of Subject matter on Organic Animal Husbandry in the VMTH Curriculum

Date: 15 June 2009

Summary:

Although organic dairy production in the State of Wisconsin is a relatively small part of Wisconsin’s agricultural economy, the sector is significant, and increasingly important to consumers. Wisconsin is a national leader in organic dairy production, with more organic dairy farms than any other state (2005). Though organic dairying is small (2% of all Wisconsin dairy farms), it is the fastest growing sector of the Wisconsin dairy industry. Of concern is the Veterinarian’s role on organic dairy farms, and what information they need to successfully interact with their organic clients. Currently, organic dairy production receives only brief mention in the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital (VMTH) curriculum.

As a follow up to a Wisconsin State Department of Agriculture, Transportation and consumer Protection (DATCP) training course for organic dairy support personnel, additional Veterinarian training needs were identified. Respondents to a survey indicated support for inclusion of organic topics in the VMTH curriculum, and as Continuing Education by DATCP, VMTH and/or the Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association (WVMA). Below are some recommendations drawn from these discussions.

Recommendations for the VMTH curriculum:
   1. Expanding discussion of the continuum of management options to visibly include organic dairies, including farmer motivations, a brief history of organic principles, and how goals and strategies differ from conventional diaries;
   2. Expanding discussion on National Organic Standards and allowable products;
   3. Emphasizing a shared foundation among all dairy farming strategies, i.e., systems management for the prevention of disease, and the shared goals of good animal health and welfare;
   4. Emphasizing similarities of the Veterinarian’s role within the strategies, i.e., a
focus on problem solving and disease prevention;
5. Objectively discussing concerns related to organic dairies, especially information gaps and research needs, and professional limitations;
6. Utilizing the existing curriculum framework, as opposed to creating an elective course.

Recommendations for Continuing Education (which may or may not involve the VMTH):
1. Development of a web-based Continuing Education course that would provide ready access to the basics of organic dairy production;
2. Development of a format to adequately present more detailed information such as in-depth systems management and specific treatment regimens. This could take the form of a workshop, or an interactive web-cast.

Background

Organic food systems have recently gained in importance, with sales of organic products increasing by more than 15% per year for the last 15 years. This results from rising concerns over public health, food safety, animal health and welfare, and environmental issues. The premium generated by this demand, as well as ideological concerns, is motivating a growing number of dairy farmers to consider transitioning to organic production. Though organic dairies are not a dominant segment of the Wisconsin agricultural landscape, they fill an expanding need for many farmers and consumers.

Transitioning to organic production has, by definition, altered the way these producers interact with their Veterinarians. To have effective relationships with organic dairy farmers, it is critical that Veterinarians understand the basic philosophy of organic agricultural systems, the National Organic Standards, allowable product use, and motivations for, and goals of, farming organically. Further, organic farming practices are, and must be viewed as, viable tools within the entire continuum of agricultural practices, and not as a mutually exclusive ‘alternative’ to conventional methods, or as a choice rooted in extreme ideology.

Training

To bridge this knowledge gap, training for Veterinarians and Veterinary students must be addressed. There are two chief ways to facilitate this training: within Veterinary medical education curriculum, and as Continuing Education. In my research, I found that currently little attention is given to this subject in the University of Wisconsin VMTH curriculum. There is a brief discussion of the organic standards and allowable products in Large Animal Medicine classes. Production medicine rotations include grazing dairies when possible (which may be organic), with a brief discussion of pasture management and nutrition. However, neither motivations or goals of organic farming, nor the basic
premise of how systems management for disease prevention applies to organic systems are discussed to any extent.

To date in Wisconsin, Continuing Education on organics has been provided via a grant-funded, one-day training course for organic dairy support personnel, sponsored by DATCP in the winter of 2008. This training course was offered in four sessions around the state, and covered introductory topics of farmer motivation, National Organic Standards and allowable products. These sessions reached 83 individuals, a combination of Veterinarians, Veterinary students and other dairy support personnel. An additional one-day, in-depth training course was conducted in October 2008, also sponsored by DATCP. This course dealt with holistic treatments for specific disease conditions, and had 46 participants.

**Needs Assessment**

As my Public Practice Masters Degree project, I followed up on DATCP’s initial training course for dairy support personnel. I surveyed the 54 Veterinarians registering for the sessions, and an additional 54 Large Animal Veterinarians practicing in Wisconsin, who were chosen at random. Overall response to the survey was 70.4%; 74% of those taking the course responded, and 67% of those not taking the course responded. These high response rates may indicate a strong desire to address the subject of Veterinarian interaction with organic dairies.

Overall, 67% of the respondents work with organic dairies (70% of those taking the course and 64% of those not taking the course), though, in most cases, organic herds make up a small percentage of their clientele.

Approximately 25-33% of all respondents feel it is important to include organic topics in the VMTH curriculum; this percentage increases to approximately 40% if done in an elective course. Currently, approximately 60% of respondents feel that training in systems management for disease prevention in organic herds is significant, and should be included in the VMTH curriculum. There is support for inclusion of these topics in Continuing Education as well (approximately 50%). In general, Veterinarians taking the DATCP course were slightly more supportive of training opportunities.

Though the number of Veterinarians surveyed is small compared to the total number of practicing large animal Veterinarians in Wisconsin, there may be a sizeable number of Veterinarians working with organic herds who have not had access to training opportunities.

Seventy-one percent of respondents working with organic herds feel it is important for them to be involved with their organic producers, although only 16% say they actually do so. This disconnect, which is not present between Veterinarians and conventional producers, may indicate their uncertainty with how they can effectively impact decision-
making on organic farms.

VMTH Curriculum

Survey respondents indicated more support for an elective course dealing with organics than for including the topics in the current VMTH curriculum. While a separate elective course would offer an opportunity to investigate organic topics in depth, discussions on campus have led to a concern that this may not be the most appropriate means for transmitting information to Veterinary students, for the following reasons:

- Veterinary School curriculum is dense, and addition of an elective course in a student’s schedule would logistically be difficult;
- Students may not be able to estimate the impact of organic dairies on their future practices, and thus may not enroll in an elective course;
- Creation of an elective course would place an additional burden on faculty, both in design and implementation, and currently there is no ready access to someone with in-depth knowledge of organic topics;
- There are strong feelings that it is important to mainstream teaching of organic agricultural systems. Relegating topics such as organic agriculture to elective courses perpetuates marginalization, and the perception that these topics are non-viable, impractical alternatives of interest only to a minority.

In the case of Veterinary school curriculum, these factors could leave a new practitioner unprepared to work with organic dairies.

Rather, organic agriculture, including organic dairying, should be presented across all coursework as one option within the agricultural continuum. As such, organic production tools can be presented alongside other dairy systems, emphasizing similarities that can be influenced by the Veterinarian. An understanding of the differences in philosophy and goals of organic dairies is also critical. Goals of an organic farm may differ from goals of conventional dairies (e.g., optimizing the system versus maximizing production); they do not represent a deficiency in the organic system but rather a conscious choice.

Within the context of the Production Medicine clinical rotations, emphasis should be placed on how concepts apply to various dairy systems: conventional, organic, and/or grazing. Many of the strategies for disease prevention are similar, and this commonality should be stressed. Likewise, all dairy systems have the desire for good animal health and welfare. Frank, objective, and inclusive discussions must be held regarding the knowledge gaps in organic livestock agriculture, specifically the need for research in the areas of herd health benchmarks, treatment efficacy, and organic standards.

While there are fewer ‘tools in the toolbox’ regarding treatment of individual animals, organic dairies still provide the opportunity for Veterinarians to become involved in problem solving and disease prevention through examination of production systems. This approach will provide the basic tools for a new practitioner, and hopefully close the
gaps that currently exist in knowledge level and in the ability to provide optimal service for organic clients. Additionally, it should serve to build a relationship with the organic dairy industry, and enhance future communication, problem solving, and research.

**Continuing Education**

Establishment of a sustained way to disseminate knowledge to practitioners who currently, or who will in the future, work with organic dairies is needed. The DATCP training was a result of a one-time grant, and there are currently no plans to continue this forum. Creation of a web-based course in the basics of organic dairying (basic organic philosophy/principles, the organic standards and allowable products) would be one method of achieving this goal. Information would be readily accessible without the need for a practitioner to be away from practice. This could be incorporated into the VMTH Continuing Education Website, or into the WVMA websites.

In-depth discussion of systems management and specific treatments would be better served by a format that allows for interaction between instructor and participants. This could be achieved in a number of ways. One option would be an interactive web-cast, which would provide a cost-effective way to reach an extensive audience. Within the web-cast format, there are various ways to structure interactions, through live presentations, pre-recorded presentations with live Q&A sessions, or as pre-recorded presentations with pre-recorded frequently asked questions.

Alternatively, a live workshop could be designed. A possible forum for sustained delivery of a live workshop would be in conjunction with the American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) annual meeting pre-conference seminars. Formats to present in-depth information would require a collaborative effort from sponsors and experts in the field of organic production.

**Conclusion**

The future of agriculture includes organic systems, with organic dairy systems figuring prominently. There is a compelling need for Veterinarians and Veterinary students to expand their knowledge and expertise in this area to best serve their organic clientele. The University of Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital is in a unique position to help fulfill this need, in turn assisting organic dairy producers and organic dairy production in the State of Wisconsin.

I, along with members of my Masters committee, look forward to further discussions of this opportunity.