

Keeping Cows Healthy On Organic Dairies

By Linda L. Tikofsky, DVM

Does organic dairy production require producers to forsake the use of modern medicine to maintain herd health?

Pick up any carton of organic milk at the grocery store and what do you see? Red barns and happy cows with tails, grazing on green pastures. Living organically seems to be the perfect life for a cow – animal welfare at its best.

Consumers believe this. Some 62% of them conclude organic dairy products come from animals that have been treated humanely.

The National Organic Program, which USDA directs, specifies certain conditions of animal management in its standards and guidelines:

- Animals must receive organic feed and have regular access to the outdoors, fresh air and sunlight.
- Tails cannot be docked.
- Ruminants must have access to pasture.
- No hormones, antibiotics or synthetic drugs can be used unless they're on the National List. This list, created by the Secretary of Agriculture, defines which synthetic and natural substances can be used in organic production.

Some in the dairy industry wonder if “farming the way my grandfather farmed” in today’s world is in the bovine’s best interest, especially if we can easily treat common diseases humanely and economically.

Less Disease -Organic dairy farming isn’t farming by “benign neglect.” Nor does it simply substitute alternative medicines, such as homeopathic remedies and botanicals, for synthetic ones. Homeopathy treats disease by administering extremely diluted doses of a substance, such as arnica or belladonna, which in massive amounts would produce symptoms in healthy beings similar to the disease. Botanicals are medically active herbs, such as garlic and red clover.

Preventive health care practices, such as paying attention to nutrition and reducing stress, and improving overall herd health are central to organic dairy farming.

Organic farming standards require that every farm have a written organic system plan for soil health, crop production and livestock management. These plans take a holistic approach toward the farm: Soil health is essential for crop health; crop health is essential for livestock health; and livestock health, through manure ap-

plications, contributes to soil health. When this balance is achieved and the system is healthy, most dairies report a decrease in animal disease after the transition from conventional to organic farming.

Various studies have shown a reduction in lameness, metritis, mastitis and calving difficulties in herds that have made the switch. A Danish study, which followed 82 organic and 99 conventional herds for 11 years, showed that the more years that herds were in organic production, the lower the incidence of clinical mastitis and the bulk milk somatic cell counts (SCC). Shortly after transition, organic herds had SCC similar to conventional ones, approximately 350,000 cells/ml. But after 11 years, the long-term organic herds’ bulk milk SCC averaged 270,000 cells/ml while conventional herds averaged 310,000 cells/ml.

A number of factors contribute to this decrease in disease. Organic dairy rations rely more heavily on forage and grazing than conventional ones. Decreased reliance on grain translates into fewer clinical and subclinical acidosis problems. Higher forage diets result in fewer digestive problems and displaced abomasums.

Cows on an organic dairy are harvesting their own food in pastures, and this increased exercise translates into leaner, fit cows and fewer calving problems.

Of course, these advantages may translate into lower milk production for organic farms. But lowering the stress of production can also reduce health problems.

Preventive Practices— What conventional practices can be used on organic dairies to prevent disease? All vaccines are allowed and encouraged for herds at risk for BVD, respiratory diseases and coliform mastitis. Standards allow the use of teat dips, electrolytes, local anesthetics and aspirin.

Although producers can’t include animal byproducts and growth promoters in diets on organic dairies, trace minerals and FDA-approved vitamins are allowed as long as they don’t originate from slaughter byproduct sources.

Organic standards don’t allow routine deworming for livestock, but producers can use ivermectin to deworm dairy animals after documenting the need. It requires a 90-day withdrawal time.

Successful organic dairies address parasite issues by prevention through:

- Prompt removal of manure.
- Beneficial insects, such as parasitic wasps and dung beetles.
- Grazing youngstock on pastures that haven’t been

used for adult cattle.

- Rotational grazing.

Focus on nutrition.

To give youngstock the “upper hoof,” calves are raised on whole milk, and many farms won’t wean them until 3 months of age.

Inevitably, an animal on an organic dairy will become ill and require treatment. Early intervention is important, and most organic producers will elect homeopathic or botanical treatment coupled with allowed conventional materials and immune system supports such as Immunoboost[®], passive antibody infections or colostrum-whey injections from hyperimmunized cows.

The organic rule specifically states that “producers cannot withhold medical treatment from a sick animal in an effort to preserve its organic status.” Producers must administer any and all appropriate treatments and if those include a prohibited substance, then that animal must be permanently removed from the organic herd. It may become part of a conventional dairy operation.

The Whole Picture — Organic production is a holistic system which balances on the three-pronged principle of soil, crop and animal. In a comfortable housing system with a well-balanced ration, outdoor exercise, well-managed pasture and a focus on maximizing herd health, a low prevalence of disease and a high level of animal well-being are achievable goals.

If disease occurs, responsible producers look for what has gone wrong with the “system” and take measures to alleviate animal discomfort and restore health. ♦