

10 Mistakes/10 Keys To Success

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There are basically two types of medical problems veterinarians encounter in day-to-day care of animals: those that are avoidable and those that are unavoidable. First are the problems that are mostly avoidable. These are problems that, with preventative care and attention to good management, a farm can avoid. Examples of these problems could include disease due to parasitism, injuries caused by broken fencing, or malnutrition from insufficient intake (starvation).

In addition there are those problems that are usually unavoidable. These are problems that may occur on well-managed farms. Examples of these problems could include dystocia or a cria "stuck" in the birth canal, injuries caused while crias are playing, or genetic or congenital diseases. Some seemingly unavoidable problems can actually be avoided with even more attention to management practices. For example: While the dystocia may not be avoidable, having a competent handler watching for birthing can help identify the problem sooner, allow for an early intervention and increase the likelihood that the dystocia is resolved with a positive outcome. Genetic defects can be decreased by carefully selecting breeding stock and "culling" suspected carriers of inferior genes from the breeding stock. While cria play is important to the health and development of the youngsters, segregating older, stronger crias from younger or weaker crias will decrease the likelihood of injury during play.

As a large animal veterinarian focusing on camelid care, I get to visit many farms and see a myriad of management techniques: some more successful than others. Over the years, I have noticed certain practices seem to

almost always lead to problems whereas other management practices seem to steer farms away from avoidable misfortunes. While I doubt there are really only ten mistakes or ten keys to success, I have listed here some of the more common mistakes I see made by producers and ways that these mistakes can be turned into keys to success.

1. Mistake - Not doing your research before buying

Key To Success: Before investing in your herd or changing your herd dynamics, see what other people in the industry are doing. Ask around and find out who has the best reputation. Do research - not just conformation and fiber - but also health care and management practices on other farms and particularly on the farm you are buying from. Visit multiple farms, shows, and events so that you can compare the different facilities and management techniques. There are many opportunities around the country to attend lectures geared at helping you become an educated consumer. In addition, research facility development before you build and think ahead to allow for growth. Have a well thought out business plan before you buy.

2. Mistake - Overcrowding: Too many on not enough land

Key To Success: Limit the number of animals to reflect the amount of useable land. Keep in mind while you are planning your pasture design and stocking density that your herd will grow. Proper stocking density will facilitate the practice of bio-security and good nutrition. High numbers compete for limited resources of food, shelter, and space as well as increase the stress on the animals. Proper stocking density will also allow for better control of disease and parasites (Permanent Pastures Promote Parasites!). While planning your herd dynamics and pasture use,

consider how you may separate weanlings, yearlings, maidens, pregnant females, dams w/crias and males. Segregation will allow care tailored to each group's particular needs. You may also need to segregate more aggressive eaters from their thinner herd mates to better control nutritional needs.

3. Mistake - Failure to quarantine new arrivals from shows, auctions, other farms

Key To Success: This is probably one of the most important things you can do to limit/prevent the spread of disease to your farm. Animals returning from events or other farms may be asymptomatic (not displaying any clinical signs) at the time of their arrival. These animals may be carrying parasites, bacterial infections or viruses. If they are healthy adults, they may even continue to look healthy while they are shedding their infectious agents into the environment (asymptomatic carriers). The crias are particularly vulnerable as their immune systems are still naive (not yet been exposed to outside infectious agents) and will easily get sick from agents that may not even cause disease in an older animal. Pregnant females are also a high-risk group and, if exposed to certain infectious agents, they may abort the pregnancy or deliver a cria with congenital defects.

The ideal quarantine does not even allow an exchange of air! This would involve setting up the quarantine with a shelter separated from your main herd as well as having the pasture/paddock with at least 6 feet between fence lines.

However, a realistic quarantine for most farms cannot include a separate shelter. In those cases other efforts should be made to limit the contamination between the quarantine area and the rest of the herd. If possible, a solid wall can separate the quarantine pen's shelter from the rest of the barn. If this also is not possible, then at the least an



“Separation between fence lines provides ideal quarantine.”

attempt should be made to maintain a minimum of six feet between pens. In addition, tools and implements used in the quarantine area should not be used in other pens. Persons handling animals should also take precautions to handle quarantine animals last, use foot baths, wash hands, and change clothing/shoes before handling other animals.

4. Mistake - Failure to check fecal egg counts

Key To Success: Checking fecal egg counts will allow you to identify parasite issues before the animals become clinically symptomatic. This will allow treatment tailored to the existing problem. For example, coccidian do not respond to the same type of dewormer as strongyles. Checking the fecal first will help avoid treating with unnecessary chemicals. Deworming “blindly” (without first checking the fecal egg count) will lead to overuse of those particular dewormers and promote the reproduction of parasites that carry genes making them resistant to those same dewormers.

5. Mistake - Failure to have a pre-purchase exam performed prior to buying

Key To Success: The pre-purchase exam should be a very thorough physical exam and may include blood

work and/or a breeding soundness exam. This exam may make you aware of physical defects that can only be detected by a trained individual (i.e., veterinarian). The breeding soundness exam may help identify congenital or acquired defects that may limit an animal's ability to reproduce. Breeding guarantees, while advisable, are not a substitute for a thorough exam. A guarantee may insure a refund if an animal proves infertile, but consider the time and money you may lose to arrive at that conclusion.

6. Mistake - Not having a scale/not performing a BCS (Body Condition Score)

Key To Success: A scale is very important to track weight gain or loss. A scale is also critical to insure that the dose given of dewormer or other drug is adjusted correctly for the individual animal's body weight.

A scale alone is not sufficient to track an animal's well being. A hands-on assessment of body condition is also necessary. For example, a pregnant female in late term may continue to maintain or even gain some weight while losing body condition if the growing fetus is using most of the nutrition ingested by the dam. Likewise, growing youngsters may gain weight but still be too thin. During the winter months

when long fleece hides body appearance, it is particularly important to get a hands-on assessment of an animal's overall condition.

Weigh and perform a BCS every 4 weeks in the summer and every 2-3 weeks during the winter. This allows for the timely detection of significant weight loss and may be your first clue that something is not right with your animal or your feeding program. Young crias, recently weaned animals, thin nursing females, or poor doers may need to be checked weekly or even more often. An animal even slightly off feed can lose >10% body weight in less than a month and it may go undetected until the animal is starting to show clinical signs of being unwell. A delay in detection of weight loss may adversely affect prognosis for survival, especially for young animals.

7. Mistake - Growing the herd too fast

Key To Success: Plan ahead and take into account that you need to keep the herd at a level that prevents deteriorating conditions on fields and allows for optimum herd health management. This ties in tightly to mistake #2, “Overcrowding.” Many breeders plan their farm based on the herd they have today. Plan at least 5 years in advance. If you breed the current herd and do not



sell the offspring and breed these offspring, your herd will begin to increase at a fairly rapid rate. Determine the maximum number of animals you can efficiently keep on your farm and try to breed and sell to stay below that number. Consider whether or not you will continue to buy outside animals and thereby increase your herd size. Consider also that you most likely will not sell animals as fast as they reproduce.

8. Mistake - Not calling the vet in a timely manner

Key To Success: Establish a good working relationship with your veterinarian. Preventative health care should be part of the discussions you have with your veterinarian. Ask lots of questions! Know your animals well so that you know what is their normal behavior and can detect signs of early illness. Camelids are prey animals and will have only subtle (if any) signs that anything is wrong until they are severely ill. Consult with your veterinarian by phone to determine if a visit is warranted. Do not trust everything you read on the internet ñ your veterinarian has years of experience and training in medicine (even if their camelid experience is limited).

9. Mistake - Not educating new owners

Key To Success: Sell with support - don't abandon the new owners you sell to ñ this is bad for the industry and can hurt your reputation. don't mislead new owners about what they are buying or the care needed. Help new owners understand the health needs of their animals. If you are selling to a new owner, invite them to spend a few herd health days on your farm so that they can learn and improve their handling skills as well as become more familiar with the management of a herd. Keep in mind that a lot of new owners have little or no livestock background. What may seem as common sense barnyard rules may be quite alien to someone who has never cared for outdoor animals. If the new owner is local, offer to help them initially with shots and toe trims. Make yourself available to an-

swer phone questions. You may also suggest seminars or educational events.

Keep in mind that if you breed an animal, YOU are responsible for insuring that the animal is placed in a good home where it will be well cared for and its minimum needs fully met! Ignorance is no excuse for abuse or neglect and selling to owners who are ignorant of an animal's needs is being an accessory to potential abuse.

10. Mistake - Thinking if an animal is female, it should be bred

Key To Success: Selectivity applies to females as well as males. Not every animal should be in the genetic pool. While most breeders are being somewhat selective in the males they choose to breed, some degree of selectivity should also be applied to the females. An animal with reproductive issues, lactation deficiencies, congenital defects, and other deficiencies should not be part of a breeding program. They very likely will pass on these defects to future generations. DO NOT sell your problems to someone else unless you fully disclose the issue!

A few more keys to success:

1. Plan for herd health days at least once per month. Set aside a day for body condition scoring, weigh-ins, toe trimming, behavior testing, veterinarian visits and ultrasounds. Depending on your herd size, this may entail splitting the herd into groups to get everyone done. Do keep good health/breeding records. An accurate history is extremely helpful to a veterinarian and is sometimes the most important clue to a diagnosis.

2. Do not limit your handling of animals to only when unpleasant things occur. If they are only handled for shots, deworming or toe trims, it will be little wonder that they are difficult to catch and handle.

3. Plan ahead for emergencies. Have a set-up for a sick or injured animal or for a cold or preemie cria. Have a basic first aid kit on hand (your veterinarian should be able to help you put this together). Know what to do if your veterinarian is hours away! Know

where the nearest referral hospital is located and how you would get there if the need arose.



4. Go to shows! Sharing ideas and competing with other breeders will help you improve the quality of your animals. Do not forget to quarantine when you get home.

5. Help each other! Mentor new owners. Organize a local club. Share a stud or mobile breeding with a neighbor. Support research. Help organize a lecture with an expert. Get involved in the industry!

Shari C. Silverman is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

Good health management and a need for compassionate care for small ruminants, camelids, and horses are what prompted Dr. Shari Silverman to establish Abbey Rose Veterinary Services. Serving clients and patients throughout New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania, the practice provides wellness programs, educational seminars and programs, as well as emergency services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In her spare time, Dr Silverman flies planes, kayaks and plays on her farm where she lives with her husband and many different animal friends.