

A day with a dairy vet: Ben Wustenberg

By **BRETT TALLMAN**
For the Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — Late in the afternoon the day before Mother's Day, Ben Wustenberg was headed to a 1,000-cow dairy outside Salem to operate on a Holstein with a displaced abomasum.

Also called the true stomach, the abomasum is normally at the floor of a cow's abdomen. Sometimes it can fill with gas and float high in the abdomen, causing a loss of appetite. It often occurs after calving.

"I did three D.A.'s yesterday," he said, "That's pretty typical (of veterinary work) — it all seems to hit at once."

Wustenberg works for Veterinary Services of Oregon, a St. Paul-based practice owned by Richard Veeman. July will mark his sixth year with Veeman, who hired both Wusten-



Brett Tallman/For the Capital Press

Veterinarian Ben Wustenberg operates on a Holstein with a displaced abomasum at a dairy near Salem, Ore., on May 13.

berg and his wife, Leticia, out of Oregon State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"My dad, Mark, was a

large-animal vet in Tillamook," he said. "Now he's the vice president of quality and member services for Tillamook County Creamery

Association. My mom, Judy, is a dairy nutritionist and my brother, Liam, is a cheesemaker. None of us got very far from milk."

Outside the milking parlor, Wustenberg stepped out of a pair of Nikes and into rubber boots, already situated inside green rain bibs. Inside he found a sink and sterilized his tools.

"For a long time I wanted to be anything but a vet," he said, "but during my junior year I had one class on Wednesdays. I started shadowing Richard (Veeman) and pretty soon I spent the whole week looking forward to Wednesday. Nobody would sit next to me in class, though, because I'd come in smelling like a dairy."

In the maternity pen was a Holstein, number 5892, with her head in the stanchion. "D.A." had been written on

her black-and-white rump in orange spray paint. Her udder was nearly empty and, though there was silage in the trough in front of her, she wasn't eating.

Draping a sanitary towel over a toolbox, Wustenberg set up his workstation inside the stall. When he was ready to start, Manuel, the herdsman who diagnosed 5892, arrived to help.

"It used to be that a vet would get call to diagnose, operate and follow up," Wustenberg said. "Now some of these herdsman — guys like Manuel — call me and say 'We've got a D.A.' They've been doing this so long, they can spot things like a D.A. right away and make the diagnosis themselves."

After making the incision, Wustenberg worked his way through three layers of muscle with his fingers. Reaching the abomasum, he used a nee-

dle and hose to puncture the bloated chamber and drain the gas.

"Some people say the gas smells like almonds," he said, adding, "I don't know what kind of almonds they're eating."

Thirty minutes after he had started, the 10-inch incision was closed again with a Ford interlocking suture. To prevent the abomasum from floating back out of place, it was pinned to the animal's side, where the scar tissue from the incision would hold it in place. Aside from relieving herself as the gas was draining, the animal hardly seemed to notice.

"This," he said, running his hand over the tidy suture to line up both sides of the incision, "is my favorite part."

As Wustenberg left the barn, number 5892 went back to eating.



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