

How I became indispensable by mentoring new associates and implementing new technologies

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Abstract

The veterinary profession is becoming specialized and sectioned, leaving the concept of mixed animal practice in question. At the same time, technology and even medications are becoming more available to our clients. Rural mixed animal practice is at a precipice. We are facing a perception of decreased value of a veterinary relationship with clients and a stereotype amongst veterinary students that rural mixed practice is dying. In this presentation I will discuss how my practices have designed a strategy to overcome these obstacles.

Key words: rural, mixed animal practice, associates, technology

Résumé

La profession vétérinaire devient plus spécialisée et fragmentée ce qui remet en question le concept de pratique animale mixte. Du même coup, la technologie et même les médicaments deviennent de plus en plus disponibles auprès de nos clients. La pratique animale mixte en milieu rural est au bord du précipice. Nous sommes confrontés à la perception d'un déclin dans la valeur de la relation vétérinaire avec les clients et à l'attitude ancrée des étudiants vétérinaires voulant que la pratique rurale mixte soit mourante. Dans cette présentation, je vais présenter comment mes pratiques ont élaboré une stratégie pour surmonter ces obstacles.

Introduction

Is rural mixed animal practice dead? Have the cowboys taken over? Am I just a signature on a script? How can rural mixed animal practice not be a dinosaur that is awaiting extinction? Our group of practices encompasses 5 mixed animal practices and 10 veterinarians across rural north Texas. We have taken on a philosophy we hope ensures our existence in the profession we love.

Discussion

What is Rural Mixed Animal Practice?

First, we need to define rural mixed animal practice. Frequently we are talking about different beasts and trying to compare them. In our area of the world, rural practice

that encompasses a solo practitioner who is actually a large animal veterinarian who begrudgingly vaccinates dogs is not sustainable. Rural mixed animal practice has to write a new definition that allows it to thrive in the population of veterinarians available and a clientele that has money to pay you. For this discussion, we will describe rural mixed animal practice as “working in an area with more animals than people while offering medicine, techniques, and expertise available in the big city”. Success for my definition of rural mixed animal practice requires that young eager veterinarians want to work for you and that clients want to pay you for your services.

What New Associates Think Matters

New associates are paramount to the success of our group of practices. In my experience, new veterinarians encompass the most modern, energetic, driven individuals our profession has to offer. There are numerous challenges with hiring new graduates, but none of them surmount the benefits. New associates want mentorship, time off, a job for their spouse, a feeling of being cared for by the company and modern technology. We have not been able to find how to keep their husbands employed, but we have designed the structure of our mentorship program around these other desires. This program has been largely successful, with our percent desired retention at 100% (i.e., we got to keep the ones we wanted) for at least 3 years.

Mentorship is accomplished in a few forms. First, we have a structured mentorship program for the first 6 months they are in practice. We prime new veterinarians by making sure they know this 6 months will be harder than veterinary school. The new associate is allowed to accelerate that program as they meet certain goals more rapidly than others. All practices in the group make concerted efforts to execute the same mentorship program that has been fine tuned over years of application. Each clinic amongst the group applies the program a little differently to fit their clinic's culture, expertise area, and availability of mentoring clinicians.

As a base, the mentorship program consists of the first 6 weeks in practice progressing from no solo work to healthy animals to sick patients. It then progresses to being in a practice a half-day alone, with an experienced clinician spending the other half of the day with the new associate. Finally, the new associate is alone in the group of clinics' slowest practices. An on-call schedule works similarly, with first solo on-call starting at 6 weeks. New associates start

by coming in for on-calls with all clinicians and progress to having a secondary on-call to come in with them, and finally a secondary on-call to answer questions.

Following the first 6 weeks, new associates work at a busy location each Saturday excluding 1 per month. They are also expected to be able to test out at 90% or greater accuracy in pregnancy determination by the end of the 6-month time frame. Most of the training for this is accomplished at the livestock commission sale that is every Sunday. New associates stay exhausted, but in 6 months are strong, autonomous veterinarians that can contribute to the productivity of the practice group.

An attitude of mentorship is extended to all veterinary team members through technology for the duration of their tenure in our group of practices. This is accomplished through “face time”, group text, and email image consultations. Virtual mentorship is a constant exchange within our practice group. Each practice is intrinsically better at something. We capitalize on these differences and strengths to keep money within the group.

The second desire of all new associates is ample time off. We have learned from the ways of our predecessors that everyone needs time off to stay employed and love their job. Our group of clinics accomplishes this goal in a few forms. First, we approach the world of practice as a team. We share and alternate equally on-call duties, cover for vacations and sick leave, and share responsibilities for specialty procedures. Second, we employ inventive scheduling to allow doctors to work a 4-day work week at half the locations and a rotating 3-day weekend at the other half. The determination for these schedule decisions is based on each clinic’s individual needs. Lastly and the newest addition to our program is, we do not limit vacation and PTO for our clinicians. We have found that these days are self-regulating, and clinicians feel appreciated and more content to work when they can take off when they need to. Similarly, our clinicians intrinsically select vacation times in our slow seasons. This inventive scheduling was initiated in 2014 with the preface that production had to be maintained. We have found in the past few years that our clinicians working 4-day weeks produce equally to their peer group in the 5-day work weeks. This alludes to the fact that young associates want to work hard while they are working and then be off. Associates that love their jobs and want to be at work produce more income for the clinics, provide quality medicine to patients, and positive interactions to clients. This philosophy allows our practices to never close, again keeping money within the group. Each clinic can offer a little different benefit in facility or availability. Teaming up allows us to accommodate any schedule or client preference or patient need.

Associates, whether old or new, want to feel that the company cares about them. Often our job as veterinarians is thankless. Our group of clinics strives to identify the private demands and goals of our employees and determine how

we can accommodate those so that they want to be at work. Twice a year, all employees from kennel staff to practice owners fill out surveys on personal issues or changes that would make their lives easier and satisfy personal life and career goals for the following year, 5 years, and 10 years. These are addressed by the company. Sometimes these accommodations are as simple as adjusting lunch break times, to catering supper during busy seasons, and progress to being as advanced as a company-owned daycare. Return on investment for these accommodations are challenging to determine. We will use the example of the company-owned daycare for discussion. Patagonia developed a model for in-house child care and found return on investment to be 91%. This was made up of tax benefits, employee retention, and employee engagement as the items that could be measured. Other large corporations found the financial benefit to exceed 100% return on investment. For our group of practices, we have not calculated the financial return on investment because employee retention and hours they are able to work is so obvious. As an example, clinicians can leave the clinic as early as a ranch wants them to, and not have to wait for a public daycare facility to open for business to be able to drop off their children.

Lastly, our practice group remains indispensable to new associates by providing the most up-to-date diagnostic and treatment tools available. Most recently, this has included arms-free ultrasound technology. We are able to afford this equipment by sharing it amongst the practice group. Numerous locations using the same piece of equipment on a schedule allows it to be paid for more rapidly. Most associates that come to interview or work have been told there is a certain set of equipment they need to work. This is another way that we help maintain the definition of rural mixed animal practice being a section of the veterinary industry that practices quality medicine.

Maintaining a student extern program enables us to advertise the advantages of working at our practice. We then pick from that pool of candidates for positions. These young veterinarians have already been “interviewed” during their tenure here as a student, and have already seen how they will be working. This method increases our chances of hiring our pick of new graduates and encourages longevity in the practice.

Conclusion

Providing an atmosphere new associates want to work in allows us to hire as needed for growth. We readily advertise the advantages of working for our practice group to veterinary students and young veterinarians. These benefits include mentorship, time off, feeling appreciated, and having up-to-date equipment.