

The evolution of a food-animal veterinarian

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Abstract

The presentation describes the complex internal and external effects that led to my career evolving from associate veterinarian to practice owner to staff veterinarian for a large family owned agriculture enterprise, to a technical services veterinarian for a large animal pharmaceutical and services company.

Key words: bovine, career, food animal

Résumé

Cette présentation vise à décrire les facteurs internes et externes complexes qui ont fait progressé ma carrière de vétérinaire associé, à propriétaire de pratique, à vétérinaire salarié dans une grande entreprise agricole familiale pour ensuite devenir vétérinaire de services techniques dans une compagnie pharmaceutique et de services pour les grands animaux.

Introduction

One definition of evolution is “the gradual development of something, especially from a simple to a more complex form.” I will present how my career has evolved from the simple practice by a new graduate in a busy food-animal practice to a more complex technical service veterinarian for a large animal health pharmaceutical company. The presentation focuses on the effects of personal goals and decisions, advances in technology and veterinary medicine, the economics of the industries we serve, and the effects on veterinary practice economics.

Career Overview

I graduated from Oklahoma State University with the DVM degree in 1989 and moved to Sutton, Nebraska to practice in an exclusively food-animal practice with 4 full-time veterinarians with primary focus on swine and beef production. After 10 years in Nebraska, I returned to Oklahoma to be the staff veterinarian for Hitch Enterprises in Guymon, Oklahoma. Hitch Enterprises had 3 large commercial feedyards with 150,000 head 1-time capacity, a large ranch, and a 15,000-sow, farrow-to-finish swine operation. In 2013 I became a technical service veterinarian for what is now Zoetis.

New Graduate/Associate Career

My early practice career was mostly focused on individual animal diagnosis and treatments, easily described as a “James Herriot” type practice. This time in my practice was focused on running sick-animal calls and seasonal herd work. A large part of my time was dedicated to developing technical skills such as pregnancy checking, basic surgery skills, and other skills applied at the individual animal basis. My success was often based on the number of calls in a day, and how quickly I could perform the technical skills as I became more proficient.

Practice Ownership

After 2 years as an associate, I became a practice owner and continued to develop my technical skills. Influenced by the skill and swine production knowledge of the senior partners in the practice, I became aware of the opportunity to grow my knowledge and skill set for the growing beef clientele in the practice. The practice also grew to have 5 veterinarians for a portion of this period. The practice aggressively evaluated its opportunities with the input of multiple, third-party strategic planning sessions. I made the decision and set goals to spend the majority of this time servicing and growing the feedyard part of the practice. Since the practice had a very large swine clientele, the economics of the swine industry were very important to the economics of the practice. Unfortunately, 1998 was a devastating year economically for the swine industry and businesses that served it.

Leaving Private Practice

Early in 1999 I left private practice to become the staff veterinarian for Hitch Enterprises in Guymon, Oklahoma. This gave me the opportunity to meet my primary practice goal of spending the majority of my time with feedyard production. This practice not only utilized the skills developed as a practitioner and practice-owner, but gave me the opportunity to become more knowledgeable and participate in the business processes of commercial feedyards and swine production. New skills developed included profit drivers of commercial feedyards, profit drivers of cattle ownership, analytics of disease and production data, and customer relations.

Becoming a Technical Services Veterinarian

In 2013, I made the decision to leave the staff-veterinarian position and became a technical services veterinarian for Pfizer Animal Health, which became Zoetis in February 2013. While this change removed me from day-to-day livestock production, it gave me the opportunity to expand my knowledge of veterinary pharmaceuticals, feed additives, biologicals, diagnostics, and clinical trial design and execution.

Facilitation of Career Evolution

In conclusion, I can credit several things that helped me through this career evolution process. The most important were:

- Always look for mentors.
- Participate in organized veterinary medicine. This participation not only is a source of continuing education, but it provides the opportunity for network development, personal friendships, and input on the future of the profession
- Recognize the abundance of food-animal career opportunities in veterinary medicine in private practice, industry, and government.
- Develop and associate with successful people, both within the veterinary profession and outside the profession.