

General Sessions

Moderators: Elizabeth Tabor, Jennifer Hatcher

Insight into the Shortage of Food Animal Veterinarians- How Do We Address the Problem?

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Abstract

A survey of Nebraska veterinarians was conducted to study factors that influence veterinarians in their choice of practice type and location, e.g. food animal or small animal veterinary practice, and the type of community where they practice, i.e. urban or rural. Objectives of the study were to determine if possible veterinary college admission criteria could be identified to improve selection of students that will ultimately pursue food animal and rural practices, and whether programs in veterinary medical colleges significantly influenced food animal and rural veterinary practice decisions of these graduates. Background characteristics significantly associated with food animal practice included: male, grew up on a working farm or ranch, parents had livestock, hometown population of 10,000 or less, and interest in food animal practice at time of admission to veterinary medical college.

Résumé

Une enquête fut menée auprès des vétérinaires du Nebraska pour connaître les facteurs qui influencent le choix du type et du lieu d'exercice des vétérinaires (p. ex. dans le domaine des animaux de consommation ou des petits animaux) et le type de communauté où ils exercent (urbaine ou rurale). Par cette étude, on voulait identifier les critères d'admission des collèges de médecine vétérinaire qui pourraient améliorer la sélection d'étudiants se destinant au soin des animaux de consommation en milieu rural et comment ces collèges influencent l'orientation de ces étudiants vers ce domaine, une fois diplômés. L'étude a révélé certains facteurs associés de manière significative à l'orientation vers le soin des animaux de consommation : étudiants de sexe masculin, ayant grandi à la ferme ou dans un ranch, venant d'une communauté rurale de 10 000 ha-

bitants ou moins, et montrant déjà de l'intérêt pour le soin des animaux de consommation au moment de leur admission dans le collège de médecine vétérinaire.

Introduction

The food animal industries in the United States are the basis for the nation's food security/supply and a multibillion dollar factor in the nation's economy. Veterinarians are critical to protecting the viability of these industries. Though they have always contributed an important public health function in helping to assure a safe food supply, it is only recently that the general public has begun to understand this role. Furthermore, the role of the food animal practitioner in recognizing and dealing with the threat of agroterrorism, which has been intuitive to the veterinary medical profession, is now being widely recognized by our nation's leaders and the general public. Ironically, as the role of food animal veterinarians is becoming better appreciated by the public, and it can be argued is becoming more important to our nation, the number of veterinarians who are interested in pursuing food animal practice careers is declining. This trend is a principal concern of the veterinary medical profession and livestock industry leaders. The trend of veterinarians away from food animal practice has been developing for several decades and most of the veterinary medical colleges in the United States, perceiving this as a concern, have initiated various programs to graduate food animal veterinarians. However, there is a paucity of impact assessment reports on the success of these programs. Unfortunately, there are many anecdotal reports from graduate veterinarians that the environment in their alma maters actually discouraged them from food animal practice careers.

The majority of "food animal veterinarians" are in reality veterinarians who live in rural communities and

have practices that include food animals along with companion animals, horses and the complete range of other animals. Often, companion animal practice constitutes an important if not crucial portion to the livelihood of the veterinarian. As individuals that work to support the health and well being of “all creatures, great and small”, in the famous words of John Herriot, these rural veterinarians contribute to the humane culture of their communities, as well its economic sustainability. It is thus primarily a shortage of “rural veterinarians” that is an issue for our veterinary medical profession.

While a shortage of rural veterinarians is a concern in many or most states in the US, it is of particular concern in Nebraska, which is a large, primarily rural state, with an extensive livestock industry that is the largest contributor to the state’s overall economy. A survey of Nebraska veterinarians was conducted to

study factors that influence veterinarians in their choice of practice type and location, e.g. food animal or small animal veterinary practice, and the type of community where they practice, i.e. urban or rural. The objectives of the study were to determine if possible veterinary college admission criteria could be identified to improve selection of students that will ultimately pursue food animal and rural practices, and whether programs in veterinary medical colleges significantly influenced food animal and rural veterinary practice decisions of these graduates.

Discussion of Study Results

Findings and conclusions from this survey will be presented.