

Veterinary Educational Programs and Food Animal Medicine Today

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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to an annual meeting of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners although not sure of any credentials I have to justify such an honor. Perhaps the program committee felt that anyone sufficiently "lamebrained" to take on a deanship in veterinary medical education today would be worth "having a look at."

Many people are saying that our veterinary colleges are falling far short in our efforts to educate and motivate our young graduates for a career in food animal medicine. An article in a recent issue of *Progressive Farmer* (1) concluded there is a shortage of veterinarians in food animal medicine, especially in some of our southern states. Opinions from cattle raising associations, even from boards of directors of educational institutions, come across loud and clear that they feel there is a shortage and a maldistribution of veterinarians.

Political pressures are very strong for the establishment of new veterinary schools in different regions of our nation. It now appears a school will be established in Florida and serious plans are being made in Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina and New England. Regardless of your viewpoint there is just reason for us all to be concerned about these developments.

There are other voices to whom we should listen concerning these issues. The so-called "Terry Report" published under the title "New Horizons for Veterinary Medicine" (2) saw little need for expansion of educational programs in food animal practice. In fact, according to the prognostications of that study, there would be exactly eight more veterinarians in food animal practice in 1980 than there was in 1970—or about 6,250. The same prediction envisioned a need for 42,000 veterinarians in 1980 whereas we had only 26,000 in 1970. Obviously this group thought most of the

increase would go into the area we often loosely group into a category called companion animal medicine.

There are many veterinarians who believe food animal medicine is a declining activity—that big farms and ranches, the do-it-yourself trend aided and abetted by commercial and industrial interests, are sounding the death knell to much of the food animal veterinarians' domain.

I am afraid none of us have the answers—the AVMA, the veterinary colleges, nor the livestock industry. Our crystal ball is just a bit too foggy. At the colleges we do know, however, that we are having many, many calls for veterinary manpower that we can't fill—both in large and small animal areas.

Let's allow for the moment that there is a scarcity of veterinary manpower in food animal medicine—that adequate service in many areas is not available. Why?

There are some in the livestock industry who say there is a maldistribution of veterinarians—too many are entering companion animal medicine, and that the fault lies at the door of the selections process being used in our colleges. In recent years, most veterinary teaching institutions have had from 5-10 well qualified applicants for every position in the beginning class. It is a good thing to have an adequate number of well qualified applicants, but the extreme situation we have had lately is not good in my opinion. It has forced selection committees to establish rather complex evaluation and rating systems which are as fair and equitable to the applicants as can be devised. Both objective and subjective criteria are established and used. However, in order to reduce human bias, many committees may have leaned rather heavily on the criteria of scholastic records and aptitude scores in the selections process. This may work to the disadvantage of the rural youngster whose

secondary school exposure in mathematics and science is often weak. Is the long term effect “weeding out” some young people who would be willing to meet the adversities of food animal medicine?

Some people argue that we are compounding the problem with our curriculum and our teaching philosophy. Students who would otherwise go back to the rural areas and enter farm practice are being enticed by companion animal medicine, biomedical research, etc. While it is true that the student may see an opportunity to practice a better quality medicine in the small animal or equine area, we also must ask the question, “How many farm boys entered veterinary medicine to get away from the farm and the hard work associated with it?”

Some argue that exposure to animal science, nutrition, breeding, livestock management is not adequate in today’s curriculum. The young veterinarian just doesn’t feel adequate to cope with the problems of agricultural business where one mistake could cost his client hundreds of dollars.

There are others who say that farm and ranch practice and the number of veterinarians involved are mostly a function of economics. The vagaries of droughts, fluctuating livestock prices, and do-it-yourself medicine really determine the need for and the role of the food animal veterinarian.

Without doubt, we could not leave the list of possibilities without considering the demanding physical requirements of farm practice as a part of the problem. Schnurrenberger (3), in a study of zoonotic risks to veterinarians in 1969, reported that 10% of the veterinarians had recently shifted from large animal or mixed practice to small animal practice. It should be noted that most of the veterinarians involved in his study were under the age of 55 at the time.

Undoubtedly, certain sociological factors enter the picture also. The location of schools, churches, shopping centers, etc. are probably more important to the veterinarian’s wife (or perhaps I should say to the veterinarian’s husband).

Need For A Diagnosis

It would seem we are badly in need of some answers. Is there really a shortage of veterinarians in food animal medicine? Will the industry really provide adequate financial returns for a decent lifestyle for the young veterinarian and his or her family? When we remember that the young veterinarian usually has seven or eight years of college education and is often heavily in debt—are the financial rewards enough for him to make ends

meet through the early years? Assuming a need for more veterinarians in food animal medicine, what is the responsibility of the veterinary medical colleges and the veterinary profession? How can we solve the problem?

Some Possible Approaches to the Solution

Obviously we can’t solve the problem until we know there is one. We must have more hard data concerning the situation. It would seem therefore that a logical approach might be as follows:

(1) A study and analysis of veterinary manpower distribution. How many young veterinarians graduating during the last five years have tried to enter food animal medicine? How many have shifted to other endeavors? Why did they change? We are going to need the assistance of experts in other fields—agricultural economists, socialists and livestock specialists should be especially helpful. At the College of Veterinary Medicine, TAMU, we are beginning such a study. Unfortunately, our resources for this type of study are very limited but we plan to go as far as we can.

(2) If we find an adequate number of veterinarians are not entering farm practice we must search for the reasons why! We must have a close look at the selection process and at our training programs. If the educational experience is turning our students away from food animal medicine we must find out why and make adjustments. If we are not adequately preparing them to meet the needs of present day agriculture we must be prepared to make changes. We have long maintained our educational objective was to provide an adequate background in the art and science of the profession so the graduate could function as a general practitioner. There was little time for electives or concentration of interests. Recently, some relaxation of that viewpoint can be seen. The core and track programs recently adopted by several schools are examples of such changes which allow students to concentrate some study in specific areas such as food animal medicine, equine medicine, etc.

(3) We must call on the livestock industry for help. Livestock raisers must realize the problem is two-sided and that all the problems can’t be placed at the feet of the veterinary colleges or the veterinary profession in general. It is difficult for the veterinarian to survive on emergency work only as you all so well know. Perhaps the whole problem might be solved by stronger livestock prices! One wonders if much of the “hue and cry” about food animal medicine today hasn’t been stimulated by higher cattle and hog prices of recent

months. A major recession or a prolonged drought might alter the situation substantially.

(4) This brings us to another proposed solution—the addition of several new veterinary schools. Are they needed? If we are at the beginning of a period of free world trade with agricultural products, if the day of agricultural surplus and curtailed production is over, then perhaps we are going to need every professional in the animal health field we can possibly educate. Here again our crystal ball grows very murky!

(5) Regardless of the number of veterinary medical institutions needed, or the number of food animal veterinarians needed, we are on relatively safe ground when we say that broadened and expanded research programs in animal health are badly needed. For too many years now we have had only token support specifically allocated for animal health research. We have been able to derive some indirect benefits from so-called human health related research and from some work supported by very limited experiment station funds. We must ask if this is even partially adequate when related to our multibillion dollar livestock industry? There are just too many disease problems, both indigenous and exotic, for which our present knowledge leaves us sorely wanting. You might ask how stronger research programs relate to veterinary medical educational programs? To me, the two are inseparable! Without research, our teaching becomes sterile. We do a poor job of inspiring our young graduates toward an inquiring attitude—a knowledge that they have only begun to learn at the time of graduation.

(6) This brings me to one of the most important and essential factors involved as a possible solution to our problem—**continuing education**. One wonders how many veterinarians left food animal practice when hog cholera vaccination was discontinued? How many others leave as agricultural management practices change in their neighborhood and the old style of practice no longer seems appropriate. How many of the veterinarians Dr. Schnurrenberger identified in his study really wanted to leave farm practice? Here again we don't have the answers but it seems reasonable that a good continuing education program might have kept many of them in food animal medicine.

Unfortunately, the kind of continuing educational program we are talking about is expensive. Society continues to wrestle with this problem—who should pay the bill? Some states are able to identify at least a nucleus of support from state

and federal dollars to support continuing education for professionals. Other states are trying to steal from their residential teaching budgets. This can be tough going when the institution is funded on a formula basis according to student credit hours. It seems essential that we, as a profession, give our undivided attention to means and mechanisms of obtaining better continuing education—Now!

(7) I could not close this discussion without a brief reference to the subject of federal support for veterinary medical education. For several years we have had some federal monies for loans and scholarships for needy veterinary students. More recently we have had limited funds provided in the form of institutional grants and later capitation grants. These grants were given on contracts obligating the school to accept so many additional students each year. Almost from the beginning, we have found ourselves living under the threat of, or actual, impoundment of funds committed by the Congress. This has created dire stress on the colleges and our educational programs are suffering! As of the summer of 1974, all current health manpower legislation will cease to be. Any new enactments, in which veterinary medicine may be involved, must come from the Congress. Federal support for health manpower education is certainly a controversial subject. For veterinary education it would seem to make sense because of the limited number of schools and because we like to think of veterinary manpower as a national resource. However, to date federal support has been a mixed bag—perhaps more of a curse than a blessing, at least for some schools.

In closing let me thank you again for the opportunity of discussing veterinary educational programs with you. I have deliberately dealt with the negative more than the positive because I took that as my purpose here. However, I am not negative about veterinary medical education. The young men and women entering our programs today are the very best our nation has to offer and the education they are receiving is better than it has ever been before. Surely there is nothing but better days ahead for our profession—in all areas of our endeavors.

References

1. Smith, R. and Buchanan, B., Is There a Veterinary Crisis in the South, *Progressive Farmer* 88:46-47 (1973). – 2. New Horizons for Veterinary Medicine, National Academy of Sc., 1972. – 3. The Zoonotic Risks in Veterinary Practice, *Veterinary Economics* 9:37-40 (1968).