

# The Challenging Future of Food Animal Practice

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Let me begin today by saying that my greatest challenge recently has been determining what I really believe to be the future of food animal practice. The future is whatever you make it - so to find the answer, let's consider where we have come from as a profession - at least during my ten years in practice.

When I entered veterinary school in 1970, there were only eighteen Schools of Veterinary Medicine. In 1974, our state board in Tennessee, and some of the others, had just begun mandatory continuing education for re-licensure. In 1974 very few specialists, ie. board certified people, were in practice, only in academia. In 1974, when looking over the country for an internship and looking at clinics to pattern my own plans for a clinic, I found only a few group practices in the Southeast doing a significant amount of large animal work - most were solo or two man mixed practices. Ten years ago, most large animal practice in the Southeast was fire engine - on the farm practice - involving very little haul-in practice.

So where are we ten years later? Today there are 26 Schools of Veterinary Medicine. Is there enough work for all the new graduates to do? What does competition do to **any** profession anyway? It makes it better! More efficient! It makes it look for new ideas - tap the untapped! It causes it to back off and re-evaluate goals and directions of the business in order to more adequately meet the needs of the clientele. Isn't that what we really should strive for - to better meet the needs of our clientele? Personally, I think there's an abundance of untapped practice potential in every area of the country that will more than absorb the number of new graduates - we just may have to turn over a few rocks to find it.

**What did mandatory continuing education and the increased availability of high quality continuing education meetings do? It made us more informed. We shared ideas. We learned much, much more about every area of small animal and large animal medicine. As a result, we found new procedures to perform, new diseases to vaccinate for, and new areas for specialization. Specialties and consultants as a whole reach out to an all new source of veterinary practice potential, and are not utilized only in universities as they once were, but in practice as well. Specific examples being embryo transfer, feedlot management, nutritional specialists, dairy specialists, etc.**

Instead of relatively few group practices ten to fifteen years ago, today multi-man practices are common. I divide these into two types. One I will call the group practice and one the associate practice. Group practices as I see them are a group of veterinarians working as a team in a practice

situation. They share ideas on diagnoses and treatment of cases, work together for the benefit of the practice in management, buying drugs, client relations, bill collections, etc. Expensive laboratory equipment, computers, and personnel can be better utilized by several doctors than one. In addition, many have **haul in** facilities for large animals. Associate practice is a term I will use in the absence of a better term to describe the type of practice where 4,5,6, etc., veterinarians share the same office and secretaries, but really carry their own practice on somewhat of a solo basis. By that I mean, one might do poultry, one might do all equine, one might do all small animal, one beef, one dairy, one embryo transfer, etc. They then receive a certain percentage of their gross as salary and a certain percentage is assigned to the hospital to cover labor, overhead, etc.

One major advantage to group practices is the sharing of emergency duty, allowing more time for family activities without reducing service to clients. On the other hand, emergency clinics are in most towns that provide after hours small animal service for the practices in the town and I think they are leading to more solo practices in these towns since emergency service is provided. I doubt this same after hours service can be provided for large animals in rural areas except through group practices. So I think group or associate practice will continue to be the more ideal arrangement for large animal practice - aside from the specialty areas.

So relying on the past as a predictor of our future, I see a bright future ahead. It may be as a group practice, or as a specialty board member, or as a consultant, or as "a predictor of the future of large animal practice". Our future could look dim **only** if we lost sight of what it took to bring our profession into a rank as one of the most respected professions in the country - **hard work** and an **honest concern** for the well-being of our clients.

What can offer more challenges and areas of growth for the future than Veterinary Medicine? What will we face as dairy practitioners if price supports are ended? What will we do in beef practice, feedlot practice, and especially embryo transfer practice if flat tax programs go into effect and the incentives for tax shelters are gone from the cattle industry? I don't know.

However, I have every confidence that our profession will meet the challenge ahead. To conclude, I felt it might be appropriate to end this topic with a part from an old speech I used while I was in the Future Farmers of America nearly twenty years ago:

**"Did you ever stop to think that when God made the earth, He could have finished it? But instead, He left it as**

raw material to tease us, to tantalize us, to set us thinking and experimenting. He left the oil in Trenton Rock, the electricity in the clouds, the rivers unbridged, and the mountains untraced. He left the forests unfelled, the cities unbuilt, and the laboratories unopened. He gave us the *challenge* of raw material, not the

satisfaction of finished perfect things - in order that man might not become bored, but engage in activities that keep them thinking, working, and experimenting.”

Fellow veterinarians, that's enough challenge to excite me about a future that holds just about as much in store for us as we want. Thank you.

