

Virtual mentorship and selecting an externship

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Abstract

Mentorship is increasingly important due to changing demands on young veterinarians, particularly those in mixed or cattle practice. Many young practitioners rely on a mentor within their practice to help guide them through many day-to-day challenges. With multiple ways to communicate on social media or other technology platforms, virtual mentorship is a way to supplement other mentorship a young practitioner may receive from colleagues at their practice.

Performing externships while in veterinary school are critical to immediate success in large animal practice. Externships serve a valuable purpose by allowing students to gain clinical skills and non-traditional service knowledge, and to expand their general knowledge base. Students are able to utilize multiple funding sources and methods of networking with practices to gain the best experiences.

Key words: mentor, mentorship, virtual, externship

Résumé

Le mentorat se révèle de plus en plus important en raison des besoins changeants des jeunes vétérinaires particulièrement ceux dans une pratique mixte ou de bovins. Plusieurs jeunes vétérinaires dépendent d'un mentor au sein de leur pratique pour les aider à relever les nombreux défis quotidiens. Avec de multiples façons de communiquer sur les médias sociaux ou sur d'autres plateformes technologiques, le mentorat virtuel représente une façon de parfaire le mentorat que le jeune vétérinaire peut recevoir de collègues dans leur pratique.

Faire des stages externes durant la formation vétérinaire est essentiel au succès immédiat dans une pratique de grands animaux. Les stages externes sont utiles en permettant aux étudiants d'acquérir des compétences cliniques et des connaissances sur des services non-traditionnels et d'accroître leurs connaissances générales. Les étudiants peuvent utiliser de multiples sources de financement et des méthodes de mise en réseau avec des pratiques afin d'acquérir les meilleures expériences.

Mentorship

Mentorship is based on the premise that “the better they are, the better I am.” Providing guidance to others can be a rewarding experience to watch them grow and develop. Mentorship and retention of young cattle veterinarians in

bovine practice is absolutely necessary to future success. Mentorship provides a framework for success by helping young veterinarians practice better medicine, develop relationships with clients, and deal with hardships in practice. In addition, developing a system of mentorship helps prevent cattle veterinarians from leaving bovine practice for other endeavors.

The urge to leave bovine practice can come from many areas. The AVMA now reports that starting salaries for food animal-exclusive and mixed animal positions have fallen behind companion animal-exclusive and predominant positions¹. There are other challenges such as weather, emergency duty, and general work-life balance that may lead young veterinarians out of bovine practice. Mentorship affords young practitioners the opportunity to see the lifestyle benefits, potential community impacts, and career fulfillment of being a mixed or bovine veterinarian.

The mentor for a young veterinarian can be developed organically, such as the owner of the practice, or more officially in a formal mentorship program such as is available through the American Association of Bovine Practitioners. Traditional mentors, such as colleagues in the practice or practice owners, typically help with day-to-day mentorship. Topics might include handling of emergency calls, clinical skills, and problem clients. Mentorship programs typically match mentor/mentee pairs in different geographic regions, so other forms of communication must be employed. This style of “virtual mentorship” allows young veterinarians to have another option to supplement the mentorship they might receive close to their practice. Virtual mentorship may certainly help young veterinarians with day-to-day challenges, but perhaps even more importantly, can provide someone to help guide major decisions for a young veterinarian. Some questions that virtual mentorship might help answer are: What services should I look to provide to meet the needs of my clients in the future? How do I make sure my practice has a future in cattle medicine? Should I buy in to my practice and what questions should I be asking? An outside perspective provided by the virtual mentor can be a tremendous asset to a young veterinarian.

Creating a situation where mentorship works requires effort from both sides. Mentors should be enthusiastic, show genuine interest, be approachable, and respond to inquiries in a timely manner. In addition, the mentor should recognize that the level of mentorship that is needed is based on individual situations. The “situational leadership” model may help guide the level of support, direction, and coaching that the mentee may need. Young veterinarians are often quite

adept at performing clinical tasks such as a cesarean section on a cow, however, may be much less confident in their ability to consult on a calf scours outbreak. Mentors need to recognize the level of support versus direction that they need to provide based on the individual task or situation at hand. Mentees must also put forth effort to make the relationship work. Mentees need to show they care and to ask questions when they arise. They need to show they are committed to success in bovine practice, not just passively interested. In addition, mentees are likely to be more adept at various forms of communication. They should make an attempt to find the best means of communication with their mentor.

Mentorship failures are not uncommon. There are many reasons why mentorship does not work, particularly when it is part of a formal program and the pairs have been matched. Mentors may contribute to mentorship failure due to insecurity, ego, failure to see success in others, communication challenges, and lack of training in proper forms of motivation and mentorship. Mentees may add to challenges by lack of response or availability, personal insecurity, communication differences, and intimidation. These challenges are typically quite easy to overcome if the pair recognizes them and makes attempts to solve the problem. As with any relationship, it is important not to come to conclusions without having a discussion so that information exchange is solid and not simply inferred.

Externships

Another key piece of success in bovine practice is preparation. Veterinary colleges typically do an outstanding job preparing students for many aspects of veterinary practice, but there are some areas where students need additional training. Veterinary student externships are an excellent way to prepare students for practice in many different areas. Clinical skill formation and non-traditional veterinary service

provision are 2 areas that students can develop and refine during an externship. Future success in bovine practice is often hinged upon initial preparation. There is no better way to become prepared than to see practitioners in action.

Many veterinary students are under current and future financial stress due to student loans. There are numerous opportunities for externship funding through national organizations such as AABP and Academy of Veterinary Consultants, state veterinary associations, state veterinary groups such as Ohio Dairy Veterinarians, and pharmaceutical companies. The food animal veterinary profession has done an excellent job setting up the framework for success for students. Money is readily available to interested students.

Choosing the right externship and setting goals for the experience are also important. Oftentimes, students choose practices based on word of mouth from other students who have had good experiences. It is important for students to continue to network with practitioners to create a pipeline of externship opportunities. Students might consider practices that perform new and interesting non-traditional veterinary services. It is also important to consider finding a practice that performs traditional services well, as those skills will serve as the foundation for young practitioners.

Students should set goals for externships, communicate those goals to practitioners, and be engaged and involved in meeting those goals. Students should seek out experiences, even during emergency hours, to try to gain the most out of their externship. Relationships that are built during externships can last a lifetime and can result in future employment or mentorship.

Reference

1. Saltman R, et al. 2017 AVMA report on veterinary markets. Am Vet Med Assoc March 2017.