

Should I stay or should I go – a qualitative assessment of why recent graduates remain in food animal practice

P. Gibbons,¹ BVetMed (Hons), MS, DACVIM(LA), DipVedEd, MRCVS; J. Koziol,¹ DVM, MS, DACT; D. Cummings,² DVM, DABVP; M. Hake,⁴ DVM, MPH; C. Sacquitne,³ DVM; M. Schmidt,¹ PhD

¹Texas Tech School of Veterinary Medicine, Amarillo, TX 79106

²Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health USA Inc, Hopkinsville, KY 42240

³Veterinary Medicine Center, Williamsburg, IA 52361

⁴Fairlife LLC, Edon, OH, 43518

Introduction

Attrition of veterinarians from private practice is concerning to the veterinary industry. Many studies have investigated the issues and challenges, but data on bovine practitioners is lacking. The aim of this study was to investigate the challenges experienced by recent graduates in bovine practice, reasons for staying and potential reasons they would consider leaving bovine practice.

Materials and methods

Veterinarians attending the 2022 AABP Recent Graduate Conference were recruited to participate in a focus group with peers. Any veterinarian interested in participating was accepted; there was no stratification of participants. Prior to the focus groups held during the conference, 3 veterinarians participated in an initial guiding focus group. Additionally, recent graduates in private, mixed animal practice in the Texas Panhandle were recruited. No incentive was offered to the participants for either group other than an evening meal. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of TTUSVM. The questions asked of the participants included challenges faced as a recent graduate, reasons to be in bovine/mixed rural practice, factors involved in them wanting to stay in practice, and reasons to leave bovine practice. Participants were encouraged to share reasons for leaving or changing practice. For the TTU group, questions were also generated from knowledge gained in the AABP focus groups to include mentorship experiences, additional professional skills, and continuing education topics they may desire. All 3 focus groups were recorded, and the recording was transcribed and anonymized. Three authors (JK, PG, MH) identified initial themes. Full coding and thematic analysis will be performed using NVivo software.

Results

A total of 23 veterinarians participated in one of the 3 focus groups. Fourteen females and 9 males participated. One of the participants practices exclusively dairy, 6 practice in bovine predominant practices (>60% bovine); 1 provides bovine consultation; 2 work in industry, and the remaining 13 identified as working in mixed animal practice. One of the participants

completed an equine internship before joining a mixed animal practice. Five of the participants disclosed that they had left a job while some did not share. When asked why participants chose to remain in bovine practice, the most recurrent themes include a love for the cattle industry, participating in the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program, and salary sufficient to pay off student debt. When asked the reason that they would consider leaving bovine practice, the most common response was a career-ending injury. A challenge that participants reported was on-call frequency. Participants working in large multidocor practices did not share this same concern. Another frequent theme that emerged was the feeling of social isolation in rural areas. Those who were in practices with fellow recent graduates found the peer support beneficial both professionally and personally. Mentorship was discussed at length by participants. Unmatched or uncommunicated expectations of mentorship were a source of stress for the recent graduate and a potential reason that a recent graduate may leave a practice. Clear communication of available mentorship opportunities and establishment of appropriate expectations for mentorship at or before the point of hire was shared as a common area for needed improvement.

Significance

In summary, our results indicated that recent graduates find peer support, especially within the practice, key to personal and professional fulfillment. Furthermore, peer support helps them avoid the feeling of isolation or loneliness often experienced in rural communities where other similarly-aged professionals are scarce. Mentorship is an area of concern for many recent graduates. Experiences revolved around uncommunicated expectations on both the mentor and/or mentee's behalf. These findings may be helpful for the veterinary industry and practice owners endeavoring to successfully recruit and retain recent graduates interested in bovine practice.

