

Transitioning from film to farm: A retrospective observational study

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Abstract

As a food animal veterinarian in a rural community, it can sometimes be difficult to appreciate the contributions that our profession provides to the local and global healthcare arena. As trusted and respected professionals, veterinarians may be the ideal messenger to help promote the “One Health” initiative of interdisciplinary collaboration and communication in all aspects of healthcare for humans, animals, and the environment.

Modern agricultural trends and demographic changes in recent decades have allowed many consumers to lose touch with their historical agrarian roots. To help bridge this gap, technically proficient veterinarians with excellent communication skills can play a key role to clarify animal agriculture practices in the US today.

Drawing on our previous life experiences, our responsibility to the veterinary profession as bovine practitioners is to embrace new challenges with imagination and grace. Recent graduates and seasoned veterans need to remain confident, yet humble, as we realize our personal and professional goals and aspirations.

Key words: Charlie, Chocolate Factory, Willy Wonka, dairy practice

Résumé

En tant que vétérinaire d'animaux de production dans une communauté rurale, il est parfois difficile d'apprécier la contribution de notre profession aux soins de la santé tant au niveau local que global. Comme professionnels respectés et fiables, les vétérinaires peuvent être le messenger idéal pour promouvoir le concept d'Une Santé. Ce concept implique une collaboration interdisciplinaire et une communication pour tous les aspects des soins de la santé pour les humains, les animaux et l'environnement.

Les tendances actuelles en agriculture et les changements démographiques des dernières décennies font en sorte que les consommateurs se sont éloignés de leurs racines agricoles historiques. Afin de combler cette lacune, des vétérinaires techniquement férus et avec d'excellentes aptitudes pour la communication peuvent jouer un rôle majeur pour clarifier les pratiques actuelles en agriculture animale aux États-Unis.

En se basant sur nos expériences de la vie, notre responsabilité envers la profession vétérinaire en tant que praticiens

bovins est d'accueillir les nouveaux défis avec imagination et grâce. Les nouveaux diplômés et les vétérans chevronnés doivent rester confiants tout en étant humble en réalisant nos objectifs et aspirations personnels et professionnels.

Introduction

“Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” follows the adventures of 4 nasty children and our hero with Mr. Willy Wonka and his famous candy plant.

Five children – and only 5 – were going to be allowed into Mr. Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. The lucky 5 would get to see all the mysterious machinery in the factory where the world’s most wonderful candy was made.

What happens when these 5 children meet the famous Mr. Willy Wonka? What happens when they pass through the big factory doors? What happens when they come upon the unknown factory workers who throw very tiny shadows on the windows and talk in rhyme? What happens when, 1 by 1, the children disobey Mr. Wonka’s orders?

That, dear reader, is the substance of “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”, a morality tale by the world-renowned story teller, Roald Dahl.

And those five children were:

- Augustus Gloop – a fat pig of a boy who would eat anything he could get his hands and teeth on.
- Veruca Salt – a spoiled little rich girl who screamed until she was bought her heart’s latest delight.
- Violet Beauregarde – the world’s champion gum chewer who was destined for a sticky end.
- Mike Teavee – a smart aleck who was addicted to television, and
- Charlie Bucket – our hero who later retired as a chocolatier and became a large-animal veterinarian.

I recently attended a working meeting of the New York State Dairy Animal Welfare Group where part of our discussion centered around the premise that veterinarians are members of 1 of the most trusted and admired professions in our society. Because of our status in our communities, food animal veterinarians may be the perfect messenger to discuss, define and defend animal agriculture in the United States today. The question was raised, “why are veterinarians so trusted by others?” If you look at the rankings of trusted professionals, we’re very close to physicians and the clergy; nurses actually top the list. But why vets? Well, I think everyone wanted to be a veterinarian at some point

when they were young. Most people feel a kinship with animals and we're seen as the protectors and defenders of the defenseless. Finally, society views our profession as being selfless, rather than selfish. Regardless of the reasons, because of our good standing in the public eye, veterinarians are the perfect choice to help communicate the message of the One Health Initiative. If you're not familiar with this organization, it's worth paying attention to, as they have developed a global strategy for expanding interdisciplinary collaboration and communication in all aspects of health care for humans, animals, and the environment. The One Health concept seeks to address the connections between health and the environment, accelerate biomedical research discoveries, enhance public health efficacy, and improve medical and veterinary education. As a partner in a rural mixed animal practice, it can sometimes be difficult to appreciate the contributions we provide as veterinarians in the larger health care arena.

But I digress. How did "Charlie Bucket" end up choosing veterinary medicine as a career? Before I explain my previous path, let me tell you about a curious incident I had last year with 1 of my partners, who will remain nameless but happens to be the previous president of AABP. "So," he said, very concerned and pensive, "what are you going to do now? I saw your Wikipedia page and it said you inherited the chocolate factory after Gene Wilder (Willy Wonka) passed on. Are you going to retire from practice?" There was a long pause before I could answer, "Hmmm, are you serious? You do realize that there really wasn't a chocolate factory, it was just a film...." Maybe art really does imitate life.

Who would have ever thought that after 48 years we would still be watching and discussing Willy Wonka? People are curious as to what ever became of Charlie Bucket. Why didn't he appear in any other films? Did he survive Hollywood? Is he still alive today? I'm relieved to tell you, my life didn't end up a train wreck. Unfortunately, most childhood actors don't have the best track record when it comes to finding their own successful path in life. I had an unforgettable experience, with Gene Wilder and Jack Albertson filming in Munich, Germany when I was 13 years old. In addition, I guess I'm really the only person to be able to include, "portrayed the original Charlie Bucket" on their resume. But to be truly honest, as an introvert who shied away from the public eye, the film industry just wasn't for me. Having supportive parents, I could walk away from acting to pursue other interests and goals.

Like many young dairy veterinarians of today, I didn't grow up on a farm. I grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, miles away from any commercial dairy farm. After my brief film career, because of a growing equine interest, I actually used some of my film income to purchase an Appaloosa mare that belonged to my distant relatives in Kansas. To help pay the monthly board, I worked at the stable and got to be friends with the attending veterinarian. He always had a smile and appeared to really enjoy his work. My father was a lawyer

for the phone company for his entire career. I really didn't have a clue what he did all day at work, but I had some idea what large-animal vets did for a living and I was intrigued.

My epiphany came in high school when 1 of the farm's broodmares, with a 2-month-old foal by her side, died suddenly in the pasture. A young veterinarian with his assistant performed a field necropsy and found that she died from an intestinal volvulus. I was amazed at the anatomy and the significant lesion observed. Our question was answered as to why she died so acutely for no apparent reason. At that moment, everything became clear to me. I was hooked.

I continued to pursue my equine interests working with dressage horses, hunters and jumpers, eventually grooming for the Japanese Three Day Equestrian Team at the 1976 Olympic games in Montreal. During a gap year between high school and college, I worked with the Japanese Olympic Team and an equine veterinary clinic near Kennett Square, PA. I then attended Ohio State as a pre-vet student, clearly intending to become an equine veterinarian.

My focus changed drastically in veterinary school after working on a registered Ayrshire dairy and riding with a large-animal practitioner in central Vermont. I realized that my core values and life style were more closely aligned with the dairy/ag community than the equestrian world. After graduating from Cornell and completing an internship with the University of Florida's ambulatory department, I returned to the northeast. For the past 32 years, I have been a managing partner in a mixed animal clinic, and more recently with Dairy Health & Management Services in Lowville, NY. In retrospect, food animal production medicine has been the perfect blend of mind and body. I have used my intellect to problem solve while depending on athleticism to meet the physical demands of our profession. While I enjoy the "flow" of our work, what I appreciate most of all about this profession are the relationships that we build with our clients and their families over time.

Changes in the Last 30 Years

There are many changes that I've witnessed over the past 3 decades in practice that I think you should be aware of as you're establishing your new career. Although they may be obvious, they help set the stage for our present discussion.

1. Our present society has lost much of its connection to agriculture

- for generations, almost all families have had some involvement with farming or livestock
- presently, farmers represent less than 2% of our population
- because of this lost connection to an agrarian society, the average person's knowledge of modern agriculture has greatly diminished or is nonexistent
- the adoption of agricultural technology has provided consumers access to affordable, abundant

foodstuffs, thereby allowing the majority of our society to pursue vocations other than farming

2. Farms have decreased in actual numbers but have grown in size

- this trend is really nothing new; ever since the first farmer owned 1 cow, he wanted to double his herd size and own 2
- but just because farms have gotten bigger, it doesn't mean they're poorly run or aren't "family" operated
- I would argue that many of my best clients, in terms of animal welfare, stockmanship skills and providing cow comfort, are from my largest farms
- consumers need to know that farm size doesn't dictate the quality of animal care provided nor the quality of the product produced

3. There is a renewed interest in the public's awareness of our farms

- because of our lost connection to our rural heritage, younger consumers or foodies have rediscovered the importance of agriculture
- they want to know where their food comes from, and how their food is grown and processed
- they want to know that the animals being raised are treated safely and humanely, and
- they want to know that the farm employees are treated with respect and are fairly compensated

4. Consumers want to know that not only the food they buy is safe, but that the farms producing the food aren't trashing the environment

- in short, we can't afford to operate our farms in a vacuum away from the public eye any longer.

5. The rise of animal welfare groups

- the "good news" is, the public is more aware of agriculture
- the "bad news" is, the public is more aware of agriculture
- as the public has become more aware and educated, many of our common practices are now being questioned
- we need to be able to justify and clarify our actions
- for example, why do we remove dairy calves from their dams at birth?
- why do we dehorn our calves?
- why do we artificially inseminate cattle using timed breeding protocols?
- why and when are cull cows removed from the herd?
- there are good reasons for all of these questions, but we must do a better job educating and communicating with consumers

6. The dairy industry has become more transparent in the last 15 years

- social media has helped farms and veterinarians relay our positive message to consumers

- "Family Farm Days" are now common occurrences in many areas
- farm newsletters are utilized by many farms to let their non-farming neighbors know exactly what's going on, season by season
- "maternity pens" at many state fairs are now the most visited fair exhibits providing an authentic, timely "teachable moment"

7. As educated clinicians, we have the ability and responsibility to utilize technology to access accurate data to help make correct, informed decisions

- let's not just use "first principles", but relevant commercial field trials with control groups that also utilize bioeconomic modeling
- remember, if we aren't concerned about economics, then we're probably just gardening

Life Skills and the Movie

Let's return to our Wonka cast and the life lessons that each represent.

Augustus Gloop - A greedy boy: had a body condition score of 5 and was transitioning poorly from adolescence to adulthood. All of us are aware of the problems that can occur when proper nutrition is lacking.

Veruca Salt - A girl who was spoiled by her parents: was arrogant, selfish and played poorly with others. She was the last type of person that any of us would enjoy working with, and her ability to work within a team was nonexistent.

Violet Beauregarde - A girl who chews gum all day long: always wanted to be in the limelight. As an early adopter of new technology that wasn't fully proven yet, she met her demise. Don't be the first, but don't be the last to adopt new discoveries and concepts.

Mike Teavee - A boy who does nothing but watch television: was rude, untrustworthy and oblivious to the real world beyond his television. I doubt that he would have passed any background checks to purchase his pistols.

Not only were all 4 of these kids obnoxious and caustic, they all lacked good communication skills. When I'm looking to hire a new associate for our clinic, what I'm really concerned about is their character and their ability to connect with clients and patients. I can teach the technical skills, but what I can't teach at this late date in their education are the intangible skills that are really at the heart of who they are. So hopefully, as trusted veterinarians with excellent technical and communication skills, we'll have a key role to play under the One Health umbrella contributing both locally and globally.

The challenges we face are immense:

- how do we feed a growing population with diminishing resources?
- how do we deal with the effects of climate change?
- how do we protect ourselves from political unrest that's ever increasingly violent?

In regard to providing for a hungry world, optimal human and animal health will only be realized with proper nutrition. For example, in order for our immune system to adequately function, carbohydrate, protein, and mineral requirements must be provided. When I trouble-shoot herd-wide disease outbreaks, my discussion always begins with the diet being fed and any changes that may have recently occurred. To highlight the importance of excellent nutrition, recent research completed at Cornell and Penn State has finally convinced the dairy industry to embrace the concept of feeding calves greater quantities of milk. Our previous method of feeding, (actually under-feeding) was to provide limited quantities of milk or milk replacer with little or no calf starter. This strategy made little sense, as the calves' ability to fight disease and reach their full production potential as adults was severely compromised. Providing calves what they truly need, when they want it, has significantly decreased pre-weaned calf morbidity and mortality caused by respiratory and enteric pathogens. Addressing nutritional concerns needs to be a priority for all food animal clinicians.

Finally, as we address our many other challenges and opportunities, it may help to remember our responsibilities under the framework of One Health:

To Our Patients: it's probably why many of us were attracted to health care in the first place. I can't stress enough the importance of being able to perform a complete and thorough physical exam at the initial visit. Regardless if you're treating 1 sick animal or are addressing a herd outbreak, the initial physical exam will help lead you to the correct diagnosis.

To Our Clients: they've hired us to consult and offer our expertise regarding their enterprise. We need to remind them of the importance of their farm within a larger global context. What happens on their farm, in your practice, really does affect our neighbors and the greater farming community.

To Our Commitment to Public Health: our veterinary oath specifically details our obligations to use our scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society and the promotion of public health through the protection of animal health and welfare.

To Our Commitment to the Environment: despite the recent political rhetoric, climate change is occurring for whatever reason. We should at least be aware of the impact that our farms, large or small, have on the environment.

Lastly, Probably Our Greatest Responsibility as veterinarians is to address and protect our own mental health. I'm sure that all of you are aware that suicide is a growing concern for our veterinary community. Our profession attracts very talented, triple type A personalities that often have trouble dealing with stress. As a group, we are driven to succeed and not accustomed to failure. There is a strong, growing support network through our universities, the AVMA and AABP of which we need to take advantage. We can't help our clients if we can't help and support ourselves. But our focus also must be broader than our own profession. The

present downturn in the dairy economy has created significant hardships on many of our farms. As frequent visitors, we as veterinarians are often the first to detect a change in the mental well-being of our clients. Unfortunately, the opioid crisis in many of our rural communities has only compounded the psychological and emotional problems that occur with a depressed economy. New York State, for example, has a well-established program, Farm Net, that links farmers to professional counseling services that are well versed in agricultural issues. A simple referral from the farm veterinarian may help save a life, a relationship or the farm itself.

So now you are several years into practice and have settled into a daily routine. I'm sure many of you are thinking "is this it?"; after 8 to 10 years of higher education and a mountain of debt, "is this really it?". "My social life is fair to poor, I live in the middle of nowhere and I work too hard". After navigating these waters myself and watching many younger colleagues, I have several thoughts that may help you.

1. **Find a Mentor:** this needs to be an exceptional teacher that will guide you through your first rocky patches. If you can't find that person in your practice then reach out to past professors, friends or significant veterinarians that you admire and trust.
2. **Protect Your Time Off and Your Personal Life:** this is a great profession, and especially if you're a workaholic, you literally can work all the time. But, your relationships will suffer and the quality of your professional work will also deteriorate if you don't get away from practice on a regular basis. Simple communication is 1 way to protect your personal relationships. A text to say, "I'm running late" or "I'm finishing up paperwork at the clinic and will be home soon" goes a long way to show respect for your significant others. Furthermore, if you have children, make sure you make it to their school concerts, plays, and sporting events. They really don't care how hard you work or how much you love being a veterinarian, they just want you to be there. The work/life balance you create gets established very early in your professional career. Be cognizant of the patterns that you're already creating.
3. **Learn New Skills:** adding to your skill set will always keep practice challenging and rewarding. But you already know this, that's why you're in St. Louis this weekend. Don't wait to be an expert in a field or you'll never accomplish anything new. Achieving perfection is the enemy of completion! Start small, but just start. Merely by being observant and voicing your concerns on your client's farms can have a positive impact. Remember that if you're the one to identify a problem, you'll probably be the one to be asked to help fix it.
4. **Invite Student Externs:** teaching and working with the next generation is our responsibility. In most cases, I learn as much from students as they do from

me. However, I do have several “truck rules” that I enforce with students to ensure a positive experience.

- Rule #1. Turn off your cell phone. I want your undivided attention.
- Rule #2. Ask questions, because if you don't I will.
- Rule #3. Be safe. We all need to get home at the end of the day. Stockmanship skills are reviewed day 1.
- Rule #4. Engage with our clients. Thank the farms that you're visiting. Remember that you're practicing on *their* animals.
- Rule #5. Help clean up and restock at the end of the day.

Conclusions

Let's use our good standing as trusted professionals to highlight the importance of advancing health care for both humans and animals in the 21st century. Like our farms, our profession can't afford to operate in a void, independent of one another, oblivious of our impact on the environment and

our fellow citizens. As One Health reminds us, our responsibility is to educate, collaborate, and communicate.

In closing, let me say that I'm honored to have been asked to participate at AABP's inaugural Recent Graduate Conference. As a veterinarian, practice owner, husband, father of 2 young adults and always a wannabe athlete, it's easy to get lost in the day-to-day struggle of keeping up with what we think needs to be done. The recent political events at home and abroad should encourage all of us to be more reflective and respectful of one another. As Augustus, Violet, Veruca, and Mike TV hopefully discovered – happiness has little to do with material wealth and status. And as Charlie knew, happiness has everything to do with what's in your heart. Be honest, be kind to each other, and be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to follow your dreams. Be confident, yet humble, as you navigate your early professional life. Know that you made the right career choice.

Congratulations once again to all of you for making this event possible. As Mr. Wonka would have proclaimed, “so shines a good deed in a weary world.”