

Beef Split Sessions

GENERAL & COW-CALF

Moderators: Hunt Tainter, Tom Hairgrove

The Importance of the General Practitioner to our Profession

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Abstract

The general veterinary practitioner is the heart and soul of our professional oath. Unlike no other in our profession, the general practitioner effectively divides their focus on protection of animal health, conservation of animal resources, promotion of public health and advancement of the application of medical knowledge to the betterment of the communities in which they live. The general practitioner is the rock on which our profession stands.

Introduction

Why do we exist, and what value do we bring to the world? Each of us ponders this question from time to time, but typically within the frame of the communities in which we live and serve. Our profession's adaptation to changes in society has for decades been guided by the veterinary oath.¹ Each of us has sworn to use our scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through protection of animal health, relief of animal suffering, conservation of animal resources, promotion of public health and advancement of medical knowledge. However, the segments in our society place different values on the comments to which we have sworn our life's work. Within some segments these differences can appear to be diametrically opposed, as in the confrontational animal rights vs. animal welfare debates. In this regard, the general veterinary practitioner can literally be asked to walk a tight rope between these differing segments within their communities.

The saving grace for generations of veterinarians has, and will continue to be, the intent of their heart.

Will Rogers may have illustrated this best when he said, "There can't be no malice in your gag if there ain't no malice in your heart." Or put another way, "What you are speaks so loudly I can not hear what you say." It is the balance between the love and respect general veterinary practitioners have for the people in their communities and the animals in their world that has served so well for generations in building respect, trust and admiration for our profession.

Understanding Value

In the veterinary profession, the commitment to animals and people forms a triangle between health for humans and animals, mental well-being and economics.

On the health side of the triangle, veterinary medicine has its roots in prevention of health problems, not only in animals, but in humans. Veterinarians have long understood that failures in preventive medicine led to physical animal suffering and emotional human suffering. The value in companion animal medicine can be hard to establish, but in production animal management, which uses as a yardstick the amount and efficiency of growth, it is much easier to establish. Veterinary medicine has long understood the zoonotic potential for many animal diseases. In this light the veterinary profession, perhaps as no other profession, has for generations established extensive zoonotic training for its members. The value post-9/11 has placed our profession in the forefront of certain homeland security bioterrorism and agriterrorism issues.

The strength and importance of the human animal bond, the mental well-being side of the triangle, is perhaps the foundation for the support our profession receives worldwide. The relationship humans develop

with the animals they live with in their world is almost indescribable. It is seen, perhaps defined in the tears a tough old cowboy or farmer sheds when they put down an animal they have worked with for years. It is seen in the choices people make to provide for their pets, sometimes to the detriment of providing for their family. It is seen in the eyes as a window into the heart of almost every animal owner with whom we work. Our ability to care for an animal's health is frequently at the core of its owner's mental well-being. As said in the commercial, it can be "...priceless."

For many in our profession, the economic side of the triangle is our forte. Some among us have devoted much of our professional careers to understanding the economic relationship between animal health and production management decisions. The relationships have been best defined in food animal production medicine and management. Cost-benefit analysis of animal health and production management is at the heart of every veterinary activity and recommendation. Millions of dollars each year are spent in the research and study of these relationships. The "80/20" rule has tremendous implications to delivery of this information. While not precise, the rule suggests 80% of the production comes from 20% of the producers. Put another way, 80% of the producers are responsible for 20% of production. Production management veterinary consultants spend a full measure of their professional activities studying the proper interpretation and incorporation of research findings into specific production management settings. But these well dedicated professionals, while having a great impact on total production, generally serve a small portion of more sophisticated producers, say, the 20% of producers that produce 80% of production. Who serves the vast majority of producers? Who has the ability and training to help these less sophisticated producers properly interpret and incorporate research findings into their specific production management settings? This is the forte of the general veterinary practitioner. Not only are they well regarded and trusted, their experience and knowledge of the small producer's unique needs regarding animal health is perhaps second to none. These veterinary practitioners not only offer the producers in their communities the ability to improve animal health and production management efficiency, but stand as the first line of defense in our nation's homeland security.

Why General Veterinary Practice?

Even though in our profession there is much discussion about specialty training, educational tracking, and even limited licensure, veterinary colleges have and continue to do an outstanding job of training students in the broad scope of veterinary science. General mixed animal veterinary practitioners come from the base of

students that have a great appreciation of the scope our profession offers. Perhaps the single driving force for many of these students is the desire to live in and serve smaller communities. Perhaps they remember a professional, their family's veterinarian, who cared for the family's pet(s), family's livestock, helped with their 4-H and FFA animal projects, mentored them in science projects, taught a Sunday school class, coached a summer sport, and/or was a member of the school board or city council. In short, these are very bright veterinarians, who not only have the ability to master a broad range of veterinary skills, but have a deep desire to serve people from several segments in society. Equally important, they recognize the opportunities and special experiences small communities offer to veterinarians raising a family.

Metamorphosis

Over time, the skills of the general veterinary practitioner are influenced by the type and kinds of animal health concerns they work with and their personal interests. They develop the ability to serve all the animal health needs from every segment in their community. The veterinarians' broad educational base allows them to adapt and focus on the special needs of specific segments. If one species of livestock predominates in a community, the general veterinary practitioner becomes extremely competent in managing health and production management issues of that species, especially in regard to production management considerations that are unique to that community. Over time, if the animal populations within a community change, general veterinary practitioners have a long history of re-educating themselves and adapting their skills to meet the community's needs.

The Rock on Which Our Profession Stands

Our profession offers lots of opportunities for growth, service and notoriety. Veterinarians who continue their education to include research degrees, such as an M.S. or Ph.D., would be in a position to provide a valued service to our profession and society. Veterinarians who continue their education to include specialty board certification would be in a position to provide a high level of competence in their practice field. In fact, our profession and all its members call on veterinarians with these special skills, degrees and training to guide us in our professional careers. The notoriety that comes from these requests can be a powerful driving force for excellence among these highly trained veterinary professionals. To the general public and society the notoriety, trust and love for our profession that we enjoy comes from practicing veterinarians, most often

the general veterinary practitioner. The general practitioner is the rock on which our profession stands.

¹Veterinarian's oath:

Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffer-

ing, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge. I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics. I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.