Commentary

Expanding flexibility in veterinary college accreditation and veterinarian licensing to help the profession meet society's needs and address challenges

N. Ole Nielsen DVM, PhD Peter Eyre DVM&S, BVMS, BSc, PhD James E. C. Bellamy DVM, PhD Fredrick A. (Ted) Leighton DVM, PhD Dr. Nielsen is a former dean of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5B4, Canada, and a former dean and professor emeritus for Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON NIG 2WI, Canada. Dr. Eyre is a professor and dean emeritus for the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24060. Dr. Bellamy is a professor emeritus and former associate dean for research at the Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PE CIA 4P3, Canada. Dr. Leighton is a professor emeritus for the Western College of Veterinary Medicine and a former executive director of the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5B4, Canada.

Address correspondence to Dr. Nielsen (olen@tbwifi.ca).

Ultimately, the value of any profession depends on its ability to address the needs of society^{1,2}; its survival depends on its ability to address the challenges it faces. In viewing the current state of the veterinary profession, we contend that changes are urgently needed if the profession is to continue addressing societal needs and ongoing challenges. For > 20 years, the flexibility of professional education and licensing embraced by the engineering profession has been discussed as a model that is exquisitely responsive to the changing needs of society and extremely effective in meeting new challenges.³⁻⁷ We believe that the argument for the veterinary profession to adopt similar flexibility in models of professional education and licensing is more compelling than ever.

The veterinary profession exists to serve society by promoting the health of animals, people, and ecosystems, with health in this context defined as the capacity for maintaining homeostasis or sustainability while attaining reasonable and ethical goals at all scales of human endeavor. The increasing complexity and unrelenting expansion of biological, physical, social, and economic connectedness (ie, globalization) in today's world has imposed new health risks at all levels of biological organization and ecological scale. To remain relevant, therefore, the veterinary profession must do more to develop and apply its knowledge and skills. However, the rapidly expanding body of knowledge, increasingly sophisticated technology, and advancements in clinical skills mean that mastering specific fields in the medical and health sciences will require ever greater specialization.

At the same time, conventional veterinary curricula can, in our view, no longer produce, in a costeffective manner, graduates with the entry-level knowledge and skills in existing and emerging fields of practice necessary to respond to societal needs. The growth in student tuition has severely curtailed opportunities for new veterinary graduates and has, in some instances, pushed them into fields that are sufficiently lucrative to repay student loans, to the potential detriment of less lucrative fields such as one health and biomedical research.

Current criteria for accreditation of veterinary programs require colleges of veterinary medicine to ensure coverage of conventional clinical fields, which limits the ability of these colleges to enhance existing or develop new programs to respond to evolving societal needs. Similarly, current licensing requirements for veterinarians focus on the broad range of clinical practice, requiring students to concentrate their efforts in these fields.

The veterinary profession is similar to the engineering profession in that each has a body of knowledge—comparative medicine for the veterinary profession and physical sciences for the engineering profession—that is essential for successful engagement in professional activities. However, the engineering profession has developed educational models that allow students, once they have mastered this baseline body of knowledge, to specialize in specific fields within the profession (eg, mechanical, civil, and electrical engineering) and licensing models that focus on the required knowledge for success in each of these specialized fields.

We believe that the public and veterinary profession would be well served if, in a similar way, the bodies responsible for the accreditation of colleges of veterinary medicine (specifically, the AVMA Council on Education) and for licensing of veterinarians (ie, state and provincial licensing agencies) would assume leadership roles in promoting greater flexibility in accreditation of colleges (specifically in regard to the veterinary curriculum) and licensing of graduates. Such flexibility would, we believe, allow the profession to better respond to societal needs while also helping it address the challenges, such as high student debt, it currently faces. Specifically, it would allow the profession to develop creative and innovative ways to address the high cost of the present educational system and high student debt while boosting the competence of new graduates in emerging fields, making the road to specialization in a chosen field more efficient, ensuring that the one health movement becomes more than just public health, and expanding the capacity of veterinary academia to contribute to medical research. Ultimately, such flexibility would, we believe, allow the veterinary profession to flourish as never before.

References

 Eyre P, Nielsen NO, Bellamy JEC. Serving society first. A time for change in veterinary medicine. J Am Vet Med Assoc 2004;225:40-41.

- 2. Leighton FA. Veterinary medicine and the lifeboat test. A perspective on the social relevance of the veterinary profession in the 21st century. *Can Vet J* 2004;45:259–263.
- 3. Nielsen NO. Reshaping the veterinary profession for the next century. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1997;210:1272–1274.
- 4. Nielsen NO. Is the veterinary profession losing its way? *Can Vet J* 2001;42:439-445.
- 5. Eyre P. Engineering veterinary education. *J Vet Med Educ* 2002;29:195-200.
- 6. Radostits O. Engineering veterinary education: a clarion call for reform in veterinary education—let's do it! *J Vet Med Educ* 2003;30:176-190.
- 7. Nielsen NO, Eyre P. Tailoring veterinary medicine for the future by emphasizing one health. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2017;251:502–504.

For all commentaries, views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the AVMA.