

The virtues of general, multi-species training

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The many challenges facing veterinary medicine have received much attention lately, both within the industry and in broader society. An acute veterinary shortage, burnout, the mental health crisis in the profession, and many other issues are making headlines and demanding action. It can be argued that a different system of veterinary education will be key to addressing these concerns. By limiting the focus of education, veterinarians will graduate being more comfortable and happier in their jobs.

There is merit to this argument. However, there are also significant problems with this logic.

Such a system assumes that upon entry to vet school or shortly thereafter, every student will know exactly what vein of veterinary medicine they will be uniquely happy pursuing throughout their career. This is disproven by the multitude of veterinary students who discover an unanticipated passion during veterinary school, or those who come to learn during vet school (or even in innumerable cases after an internship in their chosen field) that what they thought they would enjoy is actually not for them. Further, how does an otherwise small-animal motivated student know that she does not want to be a pathologist, a discipline that requires an inherently broad, multi-species knowledge base, after her first year of veterinary school when she may not have taken any pathology courses yet?

Moreover, such an extreme streaming of veterinary education would do nothing to address the attrition of veterinarians after 5, 10, or even 15 years or more of practice. For this arguably much larger group, a few extra months of clinical practice early in the education process or an extra class or two in their field of interest hold very little sway in their long-term career decisions. Veterinary Medicine fundamentally faces a retention issue, one that cannot be fixed by modifications in the structure of veterinary education alone.

In many ways, Veterinary Medicine is not like many other professions. Looking to educational systems established for other occupations may not transfer as seamlessly to veterinarians as intended. Many of the issues facing the industry have been well documented—the long hours, difficult client interactions, conflicts with family obligations, and so on. While some of these concerns are certainly experienced by other professions, veterinary medicine is unique in many respects. Issues facing veterinarians more acutely include those specific to the demands of unpredictable on call work. This includes the underappreciated but well-documented psychological stress that arises from an inability for a person to control their own schedule, the very definition of being on call. The real and significant threat of physical injury and significant repetitive strain injury are also notably less pertinent to lawyers or engineers, and can necessitate a complete lifestyle change for veterinarians. According to the British Equine Veterinary Association, equine veterinarians face the highest injury rate of any civilian profession. Many bovine veterinarians experience significant repetitive strain injuries to shoulders, backs, hands, and other body parts that physically prevent them from continuing to work with that species. The protection provided by disability insurance policies is far from complete. Even if committed to their line of work, often veterinarians are forced to make a change.

Veterinarians with a restricted scope have limited opportunities within the profession if they need to leave that realm of practice. Attempting to ensure they remain in a given field by providing

qualifications for only that practice type does not change the need to leave. Instead, it often forces them to seek opportunities outside of veterinary medicine. A more effective strategy for retention is to ensure they want to stay, while acknowledging that sometimes they cannot practice further in a given area of veterinary medicine, even if they wish to continue.

A broad-based education allows clinicians to pursue unexpected opportunities and pursuits that can renew their enthusiasm for their practice or profession. The ability to shift to a new opportunity within the veterinary medicine, be it a different species-focus of clinical practice or a new veterinary direction in One Health, government or research, would arguably retain more veterinarians in the profession as a whole. At a simple level, veterinarians can move to different areas of practice because there is demand in those areas as well. This is not a failure; these are the forces of supply and demand. If veterinary positions are good and offer attractive benefits, salary, and living realities, they will be filled. The focus on admitting the “right students” into streams perceived to be most acutely affected by the veterinary shortage avoids the issue of why there is a shortage in those areas in the first place. Instead, it simply deflects blame. Expecting veterinarians to fill positions because they are not qualified to work elsewhere is not sustainable unless the positions are appealing.

So if the realities of veterinary practice are unchanged, might not retention issues be exacerbated by streamlining education? For veterinarians with limited scope of practice, if they need to change career course due to injury, family obligations, or burnout their future options within the profession are limited. A broad, multi-species education and experience is a significant asset if not requirement in many positions to which a clinical veterinarian may transition (teaching placements in RVTs programs, food safety opportunities, and consultation with welfare agencies and government programs). A common, baseline multi-species competency that allows adaptation without starting over (for example, a few months long “refresher” in medicine and surgery for a different species) would provide opportunities for a veterinary to transition to a new focus in a reasonable timeframe. If changing streams of veterinary practice requires “starting over,” many veterinarians will find an entirely new career, outside of the veterinary profession.

Radical streaming in veterinary education also assumes that veterinarians who will succeed in clinical practice as opposed to One Health or comparative research positions must be two different people. Can one practice not benefit the other? Are none of the skills complimentary? Clinicians have a lot to bring to the table in One Health discussions from the experience they derived first-hand observing the intersection of humans, animals, and the environment in on-farm clinical settings. They understand the viewpoints of the multiple stakeholders thorough hearing these viewpoints repeatedly through years of clinical practice. There are also many examples of veterinary researchers finding renewed passion for clinical practice and filling very high demand roles as locums or part-time clinicians, or of equine veterinarians who enjoy small animal vaccine clinics as a sideline to help pay off student loans. The list of examples is long.

Changing the veterinary curriculum does not change the reality of practicing five, 10 and 15 years after graduation, where the greatest attrition in the industry occurs. Veterinary Medicine does not exist in a vacuum. It is not just about the cases seen in a given day and how they are handled medically; it includes all the realities of life. The exact educational delivery does not influence those factors or how these fit in with a veterinary career. Admittedly, retaining the status quo of a multi-species veterinary education does not address the problems facing the veterinary industry today. However, perhaps this is not the point. Do we blow up the educational system when the problems are more systematic? Do the

real problems lie elsewhere? This is a much more daunting challenge to tackle, but addressing it will be more effective than modifications to delivery of veterinary education.