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Recommended Citation
Vittetoe, Fay and Jensen, D. Nick (1975) 'Veterinary Medicine In Other Countries and the Role of the American Veterinarian Abroad,' Iowa State University Veterinarian: Vol. 37 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/iowastate_veterinarian/vol37/iss3/1

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Veterinary Medicine In Other Countries and The Role of the American Veterinarian Abroad

by

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and
D. Nick Jensen†

What is it like to be a veterinarian in a foreign country? How does a veterinarian's role in society, his education and his working conditions change as one looks to different parts of the world? How are they similar? What position does an American veterinarian assume in a foreign country? Many of the professors in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University have had professional experiences abroad. Interviews with nine such veterinarians formed the basis of this article and yielded answers to the above questions.

The foreign experiences of the nine doctors are quite diverse. Dr. Russell Mitten received his veterinary education in Melbourne, Australia. He then practiced and did graduate work in radiology in Cambridge, England. Dr. George Beran worked for thirteen years in the Phillipines, where he taught classes, conducted research, participated in University extension efforts, and helped to organize a rabies eradication program. Dr. Nani Ghoshal has received numerous degrees in veterinary studies in India, Scotland, West Germany, and the United States. Others interviewed experienced academic as well as practical veterinary medicine abroad.

VETERINARY PRACTICE ABROAD

The differences in veterinary medicine in the various countries reflect the socio-economic status of the domestic animals. For instance, pet animal practice plays a minor role outside the wealthier countries. In poorer countries resources and veterinarians are too scarce for specialized small animal practices to become established. Needless to say, private practice of any kind is a struggle to maintain. Most veterinarians are employed by governments or private commercial concerns. In Chile, for example, dairy processors supply veterinarians for the dairy herds in their milk sheds, and the government provides the remainder of the veterinary service. Generally, veterinary medicine shifts away from treatment of the individual animal and towards herd health and preventive medicine.

The shortage of veterinarians is very serious in some countries. In the Phillipines there is only one governmental veterinarian per province, or 750,000 people. Even with a team of livestock inspectors to aid him the province veterinarian spends most of his field work tending to immunizations and record keeping.

The conditions existing in many countries make disease eradication and public health a larger portion of the veterinarian's profession than in the United States. In South America the eradication of foot-and-mouth disease, tuberculosis, and brucellosis are among the major problems.

Dr. Beran pointed out that veterinary involvement in public health takes on an even more immediate importance in the developing countries. In human medicine the dominant health problems for most of the world are infectious diseases, many of which are zoonoses. Hence, veterinary medicine and human medicine become inseparable. This differs from the United States, where vast sums are being spent on heart disease and cancer research.
The veterinarian abroad is seen to be directly involved with more basic animal husbandry, diverging from his image in the United States. Widespread education in animal husbandry is limited to the developed countries, with mass media serving to update the livestock producer. In less developed countries the veterinarian often serves as the primary source of information about livestock production.

The doctors interviewed agreed unanimously that nowhere else in the world are veterinarians as well paid as they are in the United States. Even in such countries as England, Australia, and South Africa, the veterinarians are underpaid by local standards. As a result, there are fewer resources for diagnostic aids, whereas United States veterinary clinics are luxurious by world standards. Low pay also poses a problem for many developing countries, because many native veterinarians, like other professionals, have immigrated to the United States.

Veterinary practice abroad includes customs which may seem unusual by the United States standards. Dr. Mitten mentioned that in England veterinarians will often openly compete for patronage, and their clients will shop around to find the lowest price for an operation. Dr. Michael Shires found that exotic pets were common in South Africa. The practitioner is routinely confronted with baboons, monkeys, reptiles, and big cats. Dr. Dale Gillette found that the biggest hazard for a veterinarian in Chile was driving an automobile on the hairpin curves of the Andes Mountains' roads. Traffic on these dirt roads varied from large buses bulging with tourists hurtling around the bends to somber ox carts moving at a snail's pace. Large numbers of pedestrians and livestock also block the roads. Dr. Gillette remarked at the frequent accidents, many involving rushed veterinarians on their way to a call.

VETERINARY EDUCATION ABROAD

Each of the doctors interviewed has had experience either as a student or as a faculty member in a veterinary curriculum outside the United States. All of them commended most foreign schools for their quality and agreed that veterinarians abroad are generally very competent.

As was previously mentioned, veterinarians abroad are more involved in animal husbandry. Most foreign veterinary schools include a comprehensive education in animal science. Similarly, the greater involvement of the veterinarian in public health is reflected by the intense training in this field for the foreign veterinary student.

A noteworthy dichotomy seems to exist in the veterinary schools of the world. Schools of the United States have a greater emphasis on practical training than do European schools. British veterinarians, for instance, have limited experiences in dealing with living animals until their graduation. European schools place greater emphasis on theoretical education, with large faculties and small student bodies. It is more common to have a specialist teach a segment of a course. These somewhat differing philosophies of education have been extended to other parts of the world. The veterinary schools in former colonial countries tend to be modeled after those of Europe and Britain. In South America the veterinary curriculums resemble those of the United States.

In Britain "external exams" written by professors of other veterinary schools are given in an attempt to make education there more uniform throughout the country. In many countries schools are on a European system. Tests are given only at the end of every school year. In Germany new veterinary graduates are required to serve a six to twelve month internship with a private practitioner approved by the faculty.

A large volume of veterinary literature exists in German and English but students studying in a native language other than these may have to rely mainly upon information passed on by professors. Dr. Arthur D’Silva, from Brazil, stated that this is the greatest problem facing veterinary students in his native, Portuguese speaking country.

Class size varies greatly from country to country. Dr. Kenneth Preston taught at an Egyptian school that had as many as 400 students per class. At the opposite extreme, Dr. Shires graduated from a South African school with only twelve in his class.

Issue, No. 3, 1975
OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD FOR THE U.S. VETERINARIAN

For the U.S. veterinarian who would like to work to study abroad, numerous opportunities exist because of the world shortage of veterinarians. Veterinarians who go abroad will often work in developing or underdeveloped nations. Many agencies coordinate the programs recruiting veterinarians.

A staff position with the World Health Organization or the United Nations sponsored Food and Agriculture Organization would be ideal for a veterinarian interested in working in developing countries. The W.H.O. is active in all aspects of public health, while the F.A.O. coordinates agricultural research and demonstration programs in many parts of the world. Both organizations are seeking veterinarians with a career orientation and additional training or experience in public health or agriculture. For the veterinarian who desires similar work but wants a shorter commitment, the Peace Corps and the United Nations Volunteers program might be desirable. Both have permanent positions, but are staffed primarily by people donating one, two, or three years of service to ongoing programs.

The large number of agricultural technical assistance programs, coordinated by United States Aid for Independent Development, also provide many openings for the U.S. veterinarian. Program personnel are involved in both technical and educational work in a variety of agricultural fields. This program is attempting to train native personnel to replace the U.S. advisors.

Several foundations and many churches have assistance programs to foreign countries, which utilize limited veterinary services. Dr. Beran went to the Philippines with a Presbyterian Church program. He noted that these endeavors are often on a smaller scale and usually give the individual veterinarian the greatest responsibility and a chance to display personal initiative.

Many U.S. veterinarians also go abroad to teach or for advanced study in foreign universities. It is common for faculty members of veterinary schools to take a leave of absence to teach and study in another country.

Practitioners also go abroad to study for an advanced degree. Attending a foreign school may have special advantages. For example, because of their colonial involvement, British veterinarians have had experiences in dealing with animals in all climates of the world. The British schools offer training in tropical veterinary medicine that is second to none.

And finally, it is possible to become a practitioner in a foreign country. Though a few countries require citizenship to practice veterinary medicine, most require only proof of competence. This can be established by passing an exam or receiving approval by a national board.

ADVICE FOR THE VETERINARIAN GOING ABROAD

For the veterinarian who plans to go abroad, three of the doctors interviewed offered advice. Preparation was mentioned by all three as vital to the success of the foreign work experience.

Dr. Preston stressed the significance of a proper attitude towards an overseas assignment. He cautioned that the prospective participant should examine his motives carefully. He stated that the veterinarian must ask himself whether his desire to go abroad is based primarily upon a desire to travel or to truly offer his professional services. Sincerity of purpose and a loyal dedication to helping find solutions to problems of the host country are prime prerequisites. Dr. Preston also emphasized the need to strive to develop good relations with foreign colleagues. He warned that one’s mere presence as a technical adviser may point to inadequacies in their programs and cause defensiveness on their part. The end point of most programs should be to train native personnel to continue your work. Finally he asked all who visit a foreign country to think carefully prior to introducing a change in a foreign culture. It is too easy to criticize that which is different from one’s own culture. He believes that progress is more likely to occur, when one asks a foreign country what they want rather than telling them what they need.

Iowa State University Veterinarian
Improved rabies vaccine licensed for dogs and cats.

The vaccine is produced from rabies virus grown in brain tissue taken from suckling mice. Virus particles are killed during processing, so that they cannot revert to an active, dangerous state. Thus, the vaccine is quite safe for animals and those who handle the vaccine or may be accidentally exposed to it. 1, 2

By growing a large number of vaccine virus particles in a small number of brain cells, the manufacturer can produce a vaccine with high strength—or potency—and a low proportion of remaining animal tissue. Large numbers of animal cells could cause irritation and inflammation at the injection site. 1, 2

Existing rabies vaccines are made either from killed virus or live virus that is modified, or altered to keep it from causing disease. Killed virus vaccines are generally safe, but have presented problems with limited potency and undesirable side effects. Modified live virus vaccines are quite potent, but present a small, but ever-present safety risk. 1

Puppies and kittens should be vaccinated at three months of age—or revaccinated then if they were vaccinated earlier. Vaccination should be repeated yearly.


Dr. Beran emphasized the importance of good training before going abroad. He said that because veterinarians going to foreign countries are usually involved in agriculture or public health, education or experience in these fields beyond a D.V.M. is very useful. He believes a veterinarian wishing to work in agricultural programs abroad will benefit greatly from both experience in a rural practice and advanced training in animal production. Training in tropical medicine is useful in many parts of the world. Dr. Beran stresses that additional training in public health can make a veterinarian very valuable to most developing countries.

Dr. Ramsey centers his advice for the veterinarian working abroad on professional competence, commitment, and an understanding of one's position while working abroad. He said that all veterinarians abroad serve as ambassadors for our country and for our profession. Professional competence is important both for the success of one's mission and because each of us who goes abroad is a representative for many others here at home. Dr. Ramsey emphasized that the veterinarian in a foreign country must be willing to work hard and be well informed. He said that travel and other unique experiences will happen spontaneously while abroad, but that unless one works hard to accomplish his professional objectives, the trip will be a failure. Dr. Ramsey also stressed the importance of good relations with the people of your host country. He believes it is important to know the history and customs of the people, to be able to speak the language of the country, and to always remember that one is a guest while abroad. Finally, he said that one can be a better ambassador if he is able to see the good aspects of the host country and is enthusiastic about meeting the local people.

Thus, we have seen that our profession has many facets as one looks around the world. The American veterinarian who desires to work in a foreign country has a myriad of opportunities for doing so.

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**Exotic Case History**

by Char Slindee*

**HISTORY**

The owner of a mature female red-tailed hawk telephoned the College of Veterinary Medicine, Iowa State University and described the bird’s symptoms, including frequent regurgitation of food over a three week period, and gradual weight loss. Dr. David Graham, Department of Pathology, made an initial presumptive diagnosis of gastritis and recommended Pepto-bismol1 and feedings of small amounts of meat without casting (normally ingested feathers and fur which are separated out in the ventriculus to be

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