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Georgia Transplant

Neil Dyer

Iowa State University

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The first time I saw Dr. Oscar Fletcher was in the spring of 1989 during his visit to Iowa State University as a Dean candidate. He spoke to several groups and not only did I like what I heard, I liked the ease and skill with which he made his ideas understood. Some two and a half months later, on July 13th, just two weeks into his new responsibilities, I saw him again in the hallway of the veterinary school. It was 6:45 AM and he looked as if he had been up for awhile. I was thinking about a cup of coffee, my untied shoe and wrestling with a number of questions to ask him during our interview later that morning. Two hours later we sat in his office and talked about the future.

To see him now you would not think it so, but his original plans regarding a career in veterinary medicine were to return to his father’s South Carolina dairy farm and manage it while concurrently engaged in a veterinary practice. He obtained his DVM from the University of Georgia in 1964 and, though he had no particular plans for graduate school, accepted an available position and earned his MS by completing a project on swine arthritis. Due to his dairy interests, Dr. Fletcher went on to the University of Wisconsin to work on his doctorate. By a chance occurrence, he “inherited” a study on tumors in chickens and subsequently received his PhD in 1968 doing a good deal of work in avian pathology. By the time he returned to the University of Georgia, this time as a faculty member in the Department of Pathology, his father had sold the dairy. He remained in the pathology department for five years during which time he taught sophomore pathology, infectious diseases and necropsy techniques. Dr. Fletcher moved to the Department of Avian Medicine for two years and then became Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, a position he held for seven years. Most recently he was Director of the Poultry Disease Research Center before accepting the Deanship at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

To me the most obvious question was why take the job? “I had been in the Georgia system for nearly twenty one years. A change is good. Since my family is in college, it was an easy time to make a move. After my visit here last spring, it was evident to me that Iowa State was interested in change and I felt it was an opportunity for me to make an impact. I also like the slant on production medicine, the tradition of veterinary medicine at Iowa State and I knew I’d have a good faculty with which to work.”

Although early in his administration, I was curious as to what he initially perceived as problems. “We need to better manage available resources and distribute them according to what the faculty wants to accomplish. Primary among my concerns is the fact that the Teaching Hospital cannot continue to operate at a deficit. I think the state support is pretty good but a lot of the money is ear-marked and not flexible, therefore we need to explore better ways of managing those resources.”

Dr. Fletcher says he is “excited about the opportunities here but I have no delusions about what I can do. I think I’m realistic, open, and willing to listen. I’m unbiased and prepared to be a decision maker. More than anything I think the Dean is a means for the faculty to focus; to create an environment for good change. I’m not the one implementing change.”

“I would like people here to be receptive to a new point of view and be willing to listen to new ideas about how to do things. I need to interact with people and identify the college’s strengths. It is important to develop a good information flow that provides honest answers. Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear.”

Operating from the information he has, one of his goals is “to see optimal management of the resources that are available. I feel strongly about the unification of science and basic research in the veterinary college. With proper
information management, we can get the problems of applied research to basic science who hopefully return solutions to the field. We must be aligned with agriculture. From a community standpoint the veterinary school needs to be a place to go for problem solving. It is hard to separate the college’s function into areas such as research, teaching and service. We need to be of service and I strongly believe that is a type of research which produces usable information. It is important that we concentrate on areas that might help us anticipate problems. To do that we need to listen to and participate in what the community is doing. Let’s get involved.

As our conversation turned towards veterinary education, I had a real sense that we were approaching an area in which he had a fervent interest. He has some innovative and interesting ideas on the subject, beginning with pre-veterinary requirements.

“I think we need broad pre-vet requirements. Perhaps the program ought to be structured differently. Maybe all veterinary students don’t need to go through the same paces. There ought to be some way to fine tune the curriculum as the student progresses. We should consider tighter integration of undergraduate and veterinary courses. For instance, if a student’s qualifications are good he or she is accepted into the university. From that point on don’t worry about acceptance to veterinary school; we will prepare you with enough sciences to function in the veterinary program. Perhaps a student ought to be able to challenge some of the basic sciences offered in the first year of veterinary school.”

Dr. Fletcher advocates less regimentation of students and feels we “need to cut lecture and lab time and provide more elective time with quality control. By this I mean distribute students throughout all areas of activity in the college and obtain more one on one interaction with role models or mentors. Let the students get the information with proper direction.”

“I don’t know why we think that unless we tell the student everything, he or she won’t learn it. Let’s treat veterinary students more like graduate students and provide less structure. I would like to see more group study, independent study and case study. I realize this may be a problem so far as resources are concerned, but possibilities need to be explored. Veterinary education has just not changed enough to meet the needs of a changing profession. A degree in veterinary medicine offers a flexibility which allows movement in many career directions.”

In hand with this feeling about a possible change in curriculum structure is his view on handling the mass of facts presented to veterinary students.

“The amount of information to be learned is enormous. Why memorize this when we more importantly have access to the information. A certain core of information is necessary for a veterinary degree, and that core needs to be defined, but beyond that it seems to me more important to be a competent problem solver with a knowledge of where ancillary information is located. Maybe students need to buy a computer more than they need to purchase a microscope.”

With the trend towards specialization becoming more pronounced, I was curious how he regarded the fate of the general practitioner. “I think the general practitioner is still solid although specialization is here to stay. Having a variety of skills is important and a generalist is important for making initial assessments. From an educational standpoint I am not in favor of specialization from day one. Veterinarians need to be problem solvers and there are problems common to all biological systems. Our job here is to produce the best prepared veterinarian possible, one who meets the public needs.”

I came away from the interview with a strong sense of his ability to consider a problem from many different aspects when attaching its solution. That is an attribute that will serve him well. So, if you are Dr. Oscar Fletcher, I suppose the thing to do is roll up your sleeves and get to work and that is just what he is doing. As for the rest of us, I hope we listen, speak out, and roll up our sleeves as well.