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Should Veterinary Students Specialize?

by

Scott Faulkner*
Phil Gustafson†

We have changed a lot from the age of the Renaissance, where the ideal for each person was to be able to do a great many things well. We are entering the age of specialization. Increasingly people are training for more and more specific jobs and well they should be. With the vast amount of information available on so many subjects, it would be nearly impossible for one person to be expert in more than a very few areas. Much of the United States has realized this. Auto mechanics seldom service all makes, they are specialized into Volvo, Ford, or Chevrolet mechanics. There are electricians who specialize in T.V. or radio repair. Secretaries are legal, medical, or executive—the list goes on indefinitely. Veterinary medicine, as a profession, is also keeping in step with the times; more and more practitioners are specializing in either large or small animals, with many seeking certification as specialists in even more specific fields. Veterinary education, however, is falling rapidly behind the times. Students are taught extensively about and tested thoroughly over every common domestic animal, with occasional elephants, snakes, and exotic birds thrown in. Their teachers are nearly all specialists and cover the course material as only specialists can. The end result is that all students are taught to be general practitioners, while comparatively few will actually locate in mixed practices.

The student with a rural outlook realizes that most of his clientele will regard dogs and cats as they do livestock animals, that is, on a purely economic basis. Farm-type dogs and mouse-hunting cats are cheap and easy to get, and any animal which causes displeasure or threatens to cost its owner money is quite likely to be shot. Hundreds of hours spent studying rare and unusual canine and feline diseases ("It has been found that this condition will account for .01% of the case load of an exclusively small animal practice in Upper Snob Hill, California") represents literally wasted time to these people. Add countless more hours of instruction in and study of surgical techniques, which are only performed by specialists, and laboratory procedures, which require many thousands of dollars worth of equipment, or which are performed by only two labs in the country, and you have bored, frustrated students.

The situation of the small animal oriented student is perhaps even worse, at least at Iowa State University, than that of the large animal student. As a recognized leader in the field of large animal medicine (to say nothing of being located in an agricultural area), well over 60 percent of the instruction in the veterinary curriculum is large animal directed. Quite

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a bit to swallow for the student who is going to the city, and whose closest association with large animals after graduation is very likely to be at the dinner table. More immediately for the student, choice internships are now more competitive than ever, and academic standing is said to be important to land one of them. Rather ironic to need to spend most of your time studying large animals to get a position as a small animal intern, isn't it?

All of these things cause bitterness, boredom, and apathy in the students whose interests are already determined, and the happiest answer for them would be to instruct them in either large or small animal medicine, which ever they prefer. After all, the university does not require an English major to also get degrees in math and chemistry because, "You really do not know yet what you will want to do after you graduate." Those graduates who wish to change their fields of endeavor or be licensed to practice general veterinary medicine would simply have to seek further education. The two large stumbling blocks here are state board examinations and the lack of specific licensure to practice either small or large animal medicine. It seems that no matter how progressive a teaching institution tries to be, the state board exams somewhere will be antiquated; and special licenses are still in the theoretical stage.

Given the necessity of a broad education, two solutions present themselves:

1. Allow the state boards to remain as they are and lengthen the time spent in the veterinary curriculum. After all, it has been a four year course for at least thirty years, during which time medicine has undergone tremendous changes. The veterinary student today is asked to learn nearly everything the student of thirty years ago had to know ("I am giving you these six outdated synonyms for this disease because you may see them on state board exams or in some of the more esoteric literature, and besides, that is the way I had to learn it.") plus all of the advances since then. If students are actually expected to absorb this, much less retain their sanity, they will have to be given more time.

2. Teach only the relevant facts and current practices and update the state boards. This would very likely make both the instructors and the students happy. Leave the history to historians. Perhaps the instructors could be persuaded to be a bit less detailed about their specialties and a student could actually retain some pertinent information instead of trying to learn it all and forgetting most of it. For the student who has definite interests, more elective time during the senior year of clinics would allow him to specialize during his practical education, after three years of a broad academic background.

These solutions are only palliative, however. As livestock becomes more valuable, farmers and producers are going to want a veterinarian who knows the answers as only a specially educated person can, and pet owners are becoming increasingly more willing to provide their animals with the very best in the person of a highly trained specialist. Perhaps the answer lies in specialization through internships and residencies, as is done in the human field. If we do not wish to assume these extra years as a profession, then it is going to become necessary to look into specialization while still in school, special licensure, and updating of state board examinations.