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Being Dean . . . and Beyond

Neil Dyer

*Mr. Dyer is a second year student in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University.
One thing is for certain, in 1956 Phillip Pearson did not become a dentist. A few years earlier he had considered the field but decided that "standing in one place and looking into people's mouths" was not for him. Instead, that same year, he graduated from Iowa State University with his DVM and nothing was to be quite the same for himself, the College of Veterinary Medicine, and a good many other people as well. Following graduation, he did a fifteen month surgical internship at Angell Memorial Animal Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. When he had occasion to work closely with some of the staff from Harvard Medical School, using dogs as an animal model for the study of acute and chronic nephritis in humans, Dr. Pearson entertained thoughts of medical school. Ultimately, he opted to complement his veterinary degree. Prior to his experiences in Boston he had considered practice, but the idea of teaching and research began to appeal more and more. Life being the series of choices that it is, he aimed his sights to the midwest despite an offer to stay in the east. He completed a PhD in Veterinary Pathology and Surgery back at Iowa State and remained on staff until 1964 when he took a position at the University of Missouri as Associate Director of Clinics. In late 1965 he came back to Iowa State as a Professor of Clinical Sciences and Biomedical Engineering. He subsequently became head of the small animal clinic, a position he held until June 1, 1972 when he became Dean of the veterinary college.

Sitting across from me, leaning over a cup of coffee, he described his becoming Dean as a case "of being in the right place at the right time". He has held that position for 17 years, one of two Deans in the country who have been in place for such a length of time. When asked about his longevity, Dr. Pearson attributes it to stability at ISU and in veterinary medicine in general during his tenure. Considering his original aspirations, 24 years of administrative experience is not quite what he had planned.

So why resign at all when the experience, expertise and connections are all there? "I've had enough administrating," he said reflectively, "I'd like to get back to some teaching." Indeed, despite the offer of new administrative positions, Dr. Pearson will stay at the veterinary college as a clinician, among other things. If the new Dean arrives in the summer of 1989, he will take a few months to "retool" and be in the clinics by early 1990. "I think I'll miss the people aspect the most," he says of resigning the Deanship. "I've made some great friendships connected with the office."

"The one thing about veterinary medicine that stands out to me is its ability to adapt and meet new challenges. Unlike human medicine, our profession fluctuates with the various animal populations and our use of those populations. Technology, food production and the environment have all made an impression." When queried about major changes in the profession, Dr. Pearson cited "a preventative rather than treatment approach to animal medicine, individual as opposed to herd medicine and the number of women entering the field. I think all of these are positive changes that make the profession stronger".

"The two biggest challenges facing veterinary medicine today are getting good young people into school and raising the salaries of graduates." Without a doubt, the cost of a veterinary education is high, and the initial pay is usually low. Arguably M.D.s in residency make salaries comparable to graduate veterinarians but once out of residency M.D.s will make at least double what a practicing veterinarian can earn. This is a problem that has discouraged enrollment. Yet Dr. Pearson says the demand for new graduates is good and getting better, and he is optimistic about the future. This change in demand is in part due to a reduction in class size, the good base for further studies that a veterinary education provides, and the trend towards diversification.

"One college can no longer be all things to all students," says Dr. Pearson. "New strategic planning for veterinary colleges has changed us from institutions that do long range planning to those implementing immediate analysis about where we are now and how we can modify to meet new challenges." Dr. Pearson foresees curriculum changes that are narrower in focus and could possibly allow inter-college cooperation and exchanges. "It is not unrealistic to consider limited licensure in a particular species with some type of continuing education for practitioners who want to be licensed in other species."

Finally, we talked a bit about veterinary education. When I confronted him with the student feeling that there is a dichotomy between education and research that sometimes short changes the students, he told me that "education is number one. But we still need stronger research. A good teacher has an investigative mind. Good research
gets better information to students. The problem arises when the right balance is not maintained. A good Dean gets maximum utilization out of faculty members. The biggest problem I see in teaching today is a professor's tendency to give too much detail. Some instructors want to make you experts in their field. There's just too much material to allow that.” In fact, Iowa State is taking steps to alter its approach to teaching with a significant change in the first year professional courses. Restructuring of the anatomy curriculum allows students to focus their interests earlier and the inclusion of an ethics class addresses philosophical issues of the profession. These modifications coupled with an introduction to clinics through senior presentations, and a problem solving approach to courses shows an effort to deal with the ever-changing needs of the veterinary medical field. Changes of this nature are incipient throughout the College of Veterinary Medicine for all students.

As the saying goes, times change. Well, so do people and their situations. For Dr. Phillip Pearson a change and a challenge is coming, and I think it's the sort of thing on which he thrives. After all those years in the front office he is heading back into the trenches, as it were. I rather like the circularity of that move. As I sat there talking to him I had a real sense that he isn't too worried about the switch because he has been around the block, and knows that there are ups and downs attached to most everything. I wish him well. “If teaching is as important as I say it is,” he told me, “then this is really a move up.” And so it is.

DEAN PEARSON REMEMBERED

D. E. Hauser, DVM*

My first memories of Phil Pearson were from acappella choir, Ames High School, in 1948 and '49. He had a cherubic face and first tenor voice to match. I remember him as a nice guy as he was as short and immature as I was. Our paths parted as he graduated from Ames High a year after me, in 1950.

I had thoughts about Veterinary School of the next four years but ended up combining a potpourri of classes into a B.S. in Farm Operations. At that time in my life, grade point was not the first priority. After two years in the army and a year of attempting to repair a sagging grade point, I was accepted into Veterinary School (more maturity, Joan and 2 kids were changing my priorities). And to my surprise there was Phil Pearson, currently Dr. P. T. Pearson. He had not dawdled his college years, as had some of us.

I remember him as an excellent teacher, always patient with dumb questions and students, dropped arteries and instruments. Of course, surgery classes were the ultimate of all this education, and he made it even more exciting. We could not be friends at that stage because of the teacher-student relationship. There has been and always will be, mutual respect. I have been proud of his accomplishments.

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