Doctor, Heal Thy Profession
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During the late 1990s and early 2000s our profession seemed on the cusp of a Golden Age. Specialty medicine and novel technologies were becoming widespread. The pet-owning public, in the relative economic comfort of that decade, widely embraced the higher levels of medicine and accepted the corresponding rapidly increasing veterinary fees. With the addition of huge in-clinic parasiticide sales revenues, there seemed no limit to the number of veterinarians or clinics neighborhoods could support. On the large animal side, new practitioners were in high demand and supply was feared to be scarce.

In retrospect, we ignored warning signs and misjudged the consequences of our rapid evolution. Numerous forces, external and internal, have reshaped the profession:

- A global economic rollercoaster
- Consolidation and corporatization of veterinary practice ownership
- Consolidation and vertical integration of veterinary product and service suppliers
- Over-dependence upon and subsequent loss of pharmacy income
- Reduced client visits
- Gender shifts
- Changes to work-life balance expectations
- Increased specialization
- Discrepancy between demand for veterinary services and supply of veterinarians
- Reduced funding for higher education
- Dramatic increases in the debt-to-salary ratio of new graduates

While some of the forces reconfiguring our profession might be short-lived and part of normal economic cycles, other factors on this list have been trending in the same direction for some time. Although no one can predict the future with certainty, we should not dismiss or ignore the voices of our colleagues who report:

- Personal and practice bankruptcies
- Recent graduates, lacking clinical confidence or fearing shortages of private practice jobs, applying for internships at record rates
- Experienced colleagues increasingly cold-calling clinics that are not advertising positions
- Practice owners reporting 50 or more respondents to a single job posting
- Increasing class sizes and new schools opening despite indications of an oversupply of veterinarians
- Increasing competition from unlicensed practice
- Widespread concern about competition between non-profit and private clinics
- Practices closing rather than being purchased

As the recent political climate has shown, in times of stress, differences often are accentuated and become points of contention and controversy. Veterinary medicine cannot afford division. If we, as a profession, do not find common ground, forces outside our profession are likely to overrun us. Admittedly, veterinary medicine is not a homogenous group. Tensions always have existed between:

- New grads and experienced practitioners
- Academia and private practice
- Associates and owners
- People in the same market
- Veterinarians and product/service suppliers

These tensions between segments of our profession won’t vanish any more than the tension between generations. Despite this, we should keep in mind what Benjamin Franklin said speaking to the Continental Congress just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, “We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”
Individual colleagues, practices, veterinary schools, and organizations understandably have responded to these trying times by doing what it takes to ensure their own survival. Unfortunately, many of these actions potentially jeopardize the long-term health of the overall profession. Passively hoping for the best rather than actively uniting to develop a rational strategy within our profession is costly to all especially to the most vulnerable amongst us: our newest colleagues.

Veterinary students and recent graduates face unprecedented educational debt. Though these new colleagues are adults, responsible for their own choices, many of them trusted representations that the profession is secure with rapidly expanding opportunities, and that the long-term value of their education justified their investments of time and tuition. Yet a disconnect exists between official projections of veterinary job opportunities and the experiences of those seeking veterinary jobs. A recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics\(^2\) projects an employment growth increase of 35.9\% for veterinarians from 2010 to 2020. However, AVMA and Bayer/Brakke data suggest that veterinary visits and salaries are in decline even as the number of veterinarians surges. While some may find solace in government predictions suggesting continued expansion of the veterinary workforce over the next ten years, we should ask how many of these veterinarians may find themselves under- or unemployed and whether the salaries of employed practitioners will be able to balance their educational debts.

Why should every one of us care about these issues? After all, the profession is bigger than any one practitioner, so what responsibility does the individual bear?

If the recent worldwide economic collapse has taught us nothing else, it has illustrated the interdependence of a system. In her January 2012 remarks at the Plenary Session of the AVMA House of Delegates, AVMA President Dr. Rene Carlson emphasized the importance of making decisions based on what is best for the profession, “despite individual agendas.”

Veterinarians no longer can afford to view ourselves as individuals with no connection to any area of the profession beyond our own sphere. Veterinary medicine is a system. The success or failure of each of us relates directly to the value of the veterinary degree. And if that degree is devalued for any of us, it is devalued for all.

We need to attract the best and the brightest to our profession. We also must maintain the value of their degree – our degree.

Veterinary students in 2011 graduated with an average debt of $142,000. More than 41\% of these veterinarians owed more than $150,000. Only 10\% of new veterinarians graduated with no educational debt. For some, debts approach $300,000.\(^3\) These statistics do not consider the heavy debt burden of graduates from the newly accredited schools in the Caribbean, Ross University and St. George’s University.

Since 1990, the United States has added about 1,900 net veterinarians/year, 1,200/year in the small animal sector alone.\(^4\) With recent accreditation and class-size changes, those figures are expected to increase. At the same time, in 1991 dollars, the net production by each small animal practitioner has decreased from $325K to $191K.\(^5\) This crisis was predicted. We knew this was coming, and, as a profession, we did nothing.

In 1985, Karl Wise and John Kushman published in JAVMA a “Synopsis of US Veterinary Medical Manpower Study: Demand and Supply from 1980 to 2000”\(^6\). This study concluded:

- The baseline projection of the balance of veterinary manpower demand and supply indicates a continuing surplus of private practitioners on a national level to the year 2000.
- Private practice veterinary service demands that are moderately higher than the baseline would have little impact on the surplus.
- Projected non-private practice demands above the baseline would have moderate impact on the surplus.
Moderate decreases in numbers of U.S. veterinary medical college graduates would have little impact on the surplus by the year 2000.

The authors’ prognostications were distressingly accurate. They even listed conditions whereby these projections could be averted:

- Increases in Veterinary Livestock Units (VLU) and visits per veterinarian that are 5% higher than the base line in 1990 and 10% higher than the base line in 2000 are combined with:
- high non-private practice employment growth, and
- 20% decrease in the number of US veterinary medical college graduates.

None of these mitigating conditions has come to pass. Many of the predicted negative outcomes have become realities.

In 1997, Malcolm Getz, an economist at Vanderbilt University, published a book entitled: “Veterinary Medicine in Economic Transition.” The final sentence of his analysis states:

“As long as the excess supply continues, however, a number of persons trained to be veterinarians seem likely to be disappointed in their economic circumstance.”

In 1999, the KPMG Mega Study was published. The study confirmed Getz’s conclusions. In the Executive Summary, the authors stated, regarding the supply of veterinarians:

“There is evidence that in purely economic terms, there is an excess of veterinarians, which is a cause of downward price pressure and is projected to result in stagnant veterinary incomes over the next 10 years. More important, the characteristics of the supply may not closely match the demand, and there is evidence that modifications in the education of veterinarians will enable the profession to capitalize on emerging markets and to create new services.”

We have seen this crisis coming for over two decades. Yet rather than trying to reverse the trend, we have instead inflated the cost of a veterinary degree while simultaneously devaluing the degree by increasing the supply of veterinarians in the face of diminishing consumer demand. Now is the time for all practitioners to turn to the patient closest to home, the veterinary profession. The health of the veterinary system can be maintained only through the unified efforts of us all.

1 http://www.cvma.net/images/cvmapdf/Survey_Results.pdf
2 http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t07.htm
3 JAVMA 239(7):953-7, 2011
4 AVMA yearly directory and Market research statistics from avma.org
6 JAVMA, Vol 187, No. 4, August 15, 1985
I would like to offer my perspective as a private practitioner in California for the last 30+ years. As the current president of the CVMA, I have also witnessed the response of organized veterinary medicine and had the opportunity to hear from many different segments of our profession.

I commend Dr. Pion for his efforts in researching and publicizing his concerns regarding our profession. He is a leader in motivating our profession to “heal” itself. In response to the statement that “this crisis was predicted”, I would agree. I opened my first practice in 1981 and recall reading the reports of declining manpower needs through the 1980’s and 1990’s. We also witnessed the corporatization, increased specialization, consolidation of veterinary suppliers, and all the other quoted “forces” that have shaped our profession over the last 30 years. At the same time, most practices were thriving and we weathered a number of recessions without apparent effect. I don’t believe that our success through these decades blinded us to the changes taking place, but it likely delayed our response. I don’t believe that our success through these decades blinded us to the changes taking place, but it likely delayed our response. While most of the “forces” within our profession have been at work for many years, our current “global economic rollercoaster” has precipitated a crisis in our profession. Many of these other forces have now moved to the forefront. We cannot be complacent any longer!

The comments noted as “the voices of our colleagues” are right-on. I have discussed these issues with students and practitioners from all over California. We cannot dispute that students are graduating with unprecedented debt loads. In discussions with current students and the deans of our veterinary colleges, this is noted as an enormous concern. The declining job market and downward trend of salaries in our profession have them doubly concerned. While these trends can be blamed to a degree on our current economy, the repercussions to our profession will be profound. I would stress that this is NOT just a student-new grad problem. I believe that these issues will negatively affect associate salaries, practice valuations, and many other aspects of our profession.

Will these problems go away when the economy rebounds? A strong economy will likely reduce the impacts, but will not change many of the forces changing our profession. I believe, as Dr. Pion and others have pointed out, a key question is whether we have a supply issue. The Department of Labor suggests that we will need many more veterinarians over the next ten years. As we accredit more foreign veterinary schools and note that several more schools are in planning stages in this country, oversupply seems a real concern. Do we need more veterinarians? Clearly, there are conflicting numbers and we don’t have accurate information. We should not wait to find out!

Fortunately, I think organized veterinary medicine has awakened to the challenges facing our profession. I have seen a remarkable shift in the attitudes of the AVMA over the last year. They have recently committed $5M to assessing the economics and future needs of our profession. The AVMA will also be convening a task force soon to look at the accreditation of foreign veterinary schools. Perhaps most significantly, for the first time ever, the AVMA Executive Board recently met with the deans of our veterinary colleges. This meeting was convened in an effort to determine the needs of the profession versus the supply in our current educational models. In California, the CVMA has recently committed to forming a task force to evaluate the economics of our profession as it affects our own members. Nationally, the AVMA is undertaking similar efforts.

It’s a start! I definitely agree with Dr. Pion’s premise that we must all work together to promote the continued health of our profession. Recognizing and assessing the problems are the first step to solving them. We will all benefit if our profession is kept “healthy.”

In closing, I’d like to note that I remain optimistic that our profession will continue to thrive. Without question, were I starting over, I would choose a career in veterinary medicine again.

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