

Unity

A Lens into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Veterinary Profession

White Saviorism in Veterinary Medicine and How to Avoid It

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White saviorism in veterinary medicine starts with the assumption that there is an easy fix to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the veterinary profession by simply increasing recruitment of individuals from underrepresented communities. If I got a dollar for each time someone told me Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) are simply not interested in food animal medicine, or that recruiting more BIPOC people is the primary way to fix DEI in the veterinary profession, I would have paid my student loans by now. Oversimplifying these issues ignores the socioeconomic and cultural barriers to the profession that disproportionately affect recruitment and retention of talent.

For years, my Dominican blood cringed whenever people I met told me about their mission trips to the Dominican Republic. This visceral reaction, I have come to learn, stems from colonialism. Writer Teju Cole describes the White-Savior Industrial Complex as dominant or majority groups seeking to do good while satisfying their emotional needs. Cole outlines a three-step process where

these groups (1) introduce practices that perpetuate injustices, (2) heroically aim to fix them, and (3) ultimately garner recognition for those efforts. The Dominican Republic has a long history of colonization, involving the indoctrination into Spanish culture via the Roman Catholic Church, the use and abuse of slaves of African and Taino descent, and the annihilation of the Taino Native population. Based on Cole's definition, colonialism is step one. The mission trip itself is step two. Going out of your way to tell me about it? Step three.

White saviors are often well-meaning white westerners who believe they are better equipped to address the challenges of communities with a history of colonialism than the actual members of those communities. While I am all about using white privilege to empower BIPOC individuals, white saviors lack the cultural competency to solve structurally complex, multi-generational issues, at best placing a Band-Aid on the problems.

A few weeks ago, I met with a group that was given generous funds to address a particular veterinary desert, a geographic area where reasonable access to a veterinarian is limited. During our meeting I noted



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the false narrative that there are no veterinarians from these types of communities, a lack of understanding about the specific challenges of BIPOC individuals in veterinary medicine, and a lack of input from community members. I also noted a general defensiveness after I pointed out these shortcomings. I was horrified as one of the group members described someone as being “of some nationality” because their “skin is brown.” Their bias, paired with closed-mindedness to the shortcomings of their initiative, tainted their seemingly good intentions. They should have researched the challenges specific to the community and received input in the form of a committee, board, or task force empaneled with individuals from that community and similar ones.

Good intentions, privilege, and funding are powerful—but alone, they do not fix systemically discriminatory practices. Veterinary recruitment initiatives must have practices that foster inclusion and belonging at their

forefront. The debt, lack of work-life balance, and burnout we face in veterinary medicine are real to the point that individuals in our profession are actively discouraging others from joining. Imagine pairing all of that with the burden of racism, sexism, and ableism—as well as extra debt. Black veterinarians who graduated in 2020 had approximately \$100,000 more in debt compared to their white and Asian counterparts, while Hispanic and Latino veterinarians had approximately \$50,000 more debt (Larkin, 2021; Mattson, 2021). Recruiting BIPOC people into a profession in which their mental and financial health are disproportionately affected without understanding the challenges hindering their retention, and without counseling and safeguards to ensure their success, is irresponsible.

I write this article as an Afro-Latina cis-female with a chronic health condition. I also write this article as the CEO of Pawsibilities Vet Med. Our mission is to diversify all roles within the veterinary profession by providing mentorship, professional development, and resources to all intersecting identities including but not limited to:

- Ability
- Ethnicity
- Gender identity
- Non-traditional paths
- Race
- Sexual orientation
- Socioeconomic background
- Religion
- Veteran status

I am not part of every demographic I wish to serve and empower. Our team has recruited a diverse board of directors, advisory board, and group of partners and collaborators to help us grow and develop long-term, effective initiatives for diversifying the profession. Representation matters. If

you are involved in a project aimed at helping a particular group and there are no members of said group present, that is a warning sign!

This article is not meant to stop you from helping others. It is meant to remind you to educate yourself on the history of those around you, acknowledging your privilege and how your ancestors’ colonialism contributed to extreme socioeconomic discrepancies. If you intend to support communities with less privilege than your own, start by doing the work in educating yourself, and check your biases. Do not task your BIPOC friends to educate you; there are plenty of resources out there—articles, books, movies, podcasts. Consult with leaders and members of those communities on strategies that support communities in finding solutions that work. Making decisions that impact underserved and underrepresented communities without their input is largely counterproductive. It is the responsibility of allies to speak up and ensure representation. Finally, remember that the narrative is to improve the world around you, not to promote BIPOC people as people in need of saving, or yourself as a hero. ■

Sources

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