Commentary

What are veterinarians worth?

Carl A. Osborne DVM, PhD, DACVIM

“Whether it’s generosity or low self esteem, most veterinarians don’t charge what they are worth...”

This statement, which recently appeared in a veterinary periodical, prompted me to ask several questions. Who measures our worth and in what context should it be measured? Is our worth based only on monetary value, or are there other units of measure? Should any distinction be made between measuring our worth in terms of what we get from others and what we give to others?

According to Webster’s dictionary, the words worth and value can be used interchangeably when applied to the desirability of something. In contemplating my worth or value, I have been impressed by the following thought expressed by Albert Einstein. He said, “Try not to be a man [or woman] of success, but rather, try to become a man of value.” I interpret this to mean that the value or worth (or desirability) of what we unselfishly do for the benefit of others is of greater overall benefit than the value of what we do for ourselves in terms of achieving personal success. In this context, we become selfish not by pursuing our own needs, but rather by neglecting the needs of others.

How might we apply Einstein’s admonition to the veterinary profession? A profession is an occupation that: 1) regulates itself through systematic required education or collegial discipline, 2) has a base in a technical specialized knowledge, and 3) has a service rather than a profit motive guided by an ethical code. Whereas the explicit mission of for-profit companies like General Motors and Microsoft is to make a monetary gain. Where the motive behind generating value-based free enterprise fees-for-service needed to maintain the fiscal vitality of properly staffed and equipped veterinary hospitals and the motive behind peddling unnecessary services and products to increase fees to a maximum

Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108.

302 Views: Commentary JAVMA, Vol 219, No. 3, August 1, 2001

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 09/17/23 05:09 AM UTC
determined by what the traffic will bear. Ethical advertising, sustained cash flow, and adequate net income are practice necessities. But when others try to convince us to think of our worth as veterinarians primarily in terms of the size of our bottom line, we must be on guard not to lose sight of our role as advocates for patients. Our conscience, guided by the Golden Rule, should prevent us from taking unfair financial advantage of those who trust our integrity when they turn to us for help. To this end, the humane elements of the practice of veterinary medicine are just as important, if not more so, than financial considerations. We should be on guard to maintain our ethical balance so as not to tip the scales toward caring more about our profits than about our patients. We must use caution not to lose our balance to the extent that management of our fees becomes detrimental to the management of our patients. I have seen this occur when, for example, the fees of a few intensive care units appeared to be heavily influenced by the philosophy of charging what the traffic had to bear because, in the setting of life-threatening situations, the immediate alternatives available to clients were limited. In these instances, the abbreviation ICU ironically became more representative of intensive cost units than intensive care units. The unfortunate outcome for some patients was loss of their lives as a result of euthanasia being chosen after the high cost of care became more than the clients could bear.

Please recall the statement cited at the beginning of this essay. “Whether it’s generosity or low self esteem, most veterinarians don’t charge what they are worth.” I pen this essay in hope that the implications of this interpretation will be given balanced consideration. In considering what is truly valuable, shouldn’t we ask what will bring others as well as ourselves genuine happiness and contentment in the long run? From my perspective, our true worth should be measured in the context of what it accomplishes in behalf of others, not just in light of what it does for us in the way of net income or prestige. Therefore, we must not be seduced into devaluing true values. In this context, the generosity of veterinarians is an attribute that is to be lauded rather than criticized. It should be included in what Dr. Lonnie King described as defining principles or core values of our profession that should never be compromised. However, as members of one of the healing professions, our generosity should be motivated by more than a sense of duty or obligation. It should come from our hearts. Whereas it is our mind that conceives there are profits to make, it is our heart that motivates us to give more than take. Hippocrates expressed it this way: “Sometimes give your services for nothing... and if there be an opportunity of serving expressed it this way: “Sometimes give your services...”

Why? Because there is more happiness derived from giving than receiving. Happiness is a by-product of doing things for others, not an end in itself. Likewise, we should not confuse the attributes of modesty and humility with the negative connotation of having low self-esteem. The attribute of modesty, which is defined as an awareness of one’s limitations, will move us to be reasonable in our expectations of others and considerate of their needs. Likewise humility, an attribute that encompasses freedom from pride or arrogance, is an admirable quality. But being humble is not synonymous with having low self-esteem (ie, a low evaluation of self-worth). Rather, by being humble, we will not feel that we are worth more than those needing our help. Despite our DVM, VMD, AHT, and PhD degrees or certification, we will recognize that we are all servants to other living beings. Our mission is to serve, not to be served. In this context, I concur with the view of Dr. Lonnie King, who stated that it is possible to maintain our strong set of core values in the delivery of excellent healthcare while being remunerated in a manner that is congruous with our high level of training and the true value of our services.

Fortunately, thousands of veterinarians continue to show by word and deed that they really care. They do not take the selfish view that the problems facing others are not their concern. They continue to uphold our profession’s ethical tradition of sharing and caring by avoiding the new code of making and taking with indifference to the plight of others. With these thoughts in mind, I have taken the liberty of rephrasing the statement cited at the beginning of this essay so that it can be correctly applied to countless colleagues in our profession: “Because of generosity, humility, and modesty, the worth (or value alluded to by Einstein) of services provided by most veterinarians far exceeds their fees.” If we are truly motivated to serve, we will find that the greatest reward for doing is the opportunity to do more.

References
9. King LJ. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. J Am Vet Med Assoc 2000;217:996–998.