Commentary

How schools of veterinary medicine should respond to current predictions regarding trends in the veterinary workforce

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Are concerns about job market demands for veterinary school graduates justified? Given the current, challenging economy, it is not surprising that, particularly in certain fields, students are having difficulties finding jobs when they get out of school. However, the outlook for veterinary school graduates may be more optimistic than current anecdotal evidence suggests. As an example, in its most recent annual survey of fourth-year veterinary students, the AVMA found that of those students expecting to graduate in spring 2011 who were actively seeking employment or advanced education in veterinary medicine, 74.3% had received at least one offer by the time of the survey. By comparison, a national survey of deans of US nursing schools offering entry-level baccalaureate (BSN) degrees found that a mean of only 65% of new graduates had one or more job offers at the time of graduation. This was still substantially higher than the percentage reported in a 2010 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, which found that only 24.4% of 35,000 new college graduates across disciplines had a job offer at the time of graduation.

It is certainly possible, looking at one particular aspect of veterinary practice in one particular location, to conclude that there is an oversupply of veterinarians. However, taking a more comprehensive, longer-term view could dramatically alter that assessment. For example, the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the United Kingdom during 2001 and 2002 quickly brought to light a shortage of veterinarians who could adequately address the outbreak. That outbreak, which devastated many rural communities, affected more than 9,600 farms and resulted in the death of approximately 10 million animals. Veterinarians from all over the world traveled to the United Kingdom to help control and eliminate the disease.

Such unforeseen events emphasize that veterinary workforce projections require constant reassessment and must be made with an eye to the future. As an example, the schools and colleges of veterinary medicine in the United States graduate approximately 80 students each year with combined veterinary and doctoral degrees, but this is not nearly enough to fill the expected need for veterinarian researchers.

Educational institutions cannot and should not change quickly and veterinary medical education should not be expected to change dramatically with every perceived shift in the prevailing winds. There are reasons why major decisions that affect educational institutions are not made at the whim of a few. Deans answer to presidents or provosts, who in turn answer to governing boards and legislative bodies. Planning for and implementing major changes take at least five years, given the lag time between when students first apply for admission and when they graduate. By necessity, therefore, no decision is made without a thorough evaluation and assessment that, as much as possible, takes a long-term view based on solid, rather than anecdotal, evidence.

 Likewise, the other health professions are subject to imprecise predictions of future workforce needs, and this year's shortage of doctors or nurses can become next year's oversupply, or vice versa. However, it is possible to examine overarching societal trends and arrive at some sound and simple conclusions. When one does so, the evidence is overwhelming that in an increasingly complex society where the health of animals and people is often connected, we will need more medical professionals with the capacity to evaluate and address those health-care needs. No professionals are better prepared to do so than those who have received a comprehensive education in the comparative profession of veterinary medicine.

Veterinary medical education requires a balancing act between providing for projected needs and producing graduates who are nimble enough to respond to society's requirements at the moment. My view is that society's future health-care needs are great and that veterinarians are uniquely equipped to respond and adapt to those needs.

References

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