

Letters to the Editor

Unemployment and underemployment

I was waiting for a response to my recent letter to the editor¹ suggesting that the colleges of veterinary medicine should decrease the number of new students they admit, and saw that it came, at least in a way, in the *JAVMA* News story² about efforts by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges to collect more data on student debt and recent graduate employment.

In the news story, Dr. Deborah Kochevar, dean of the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine and AAVMC president, is quoted as saying that “unemployment is not the issue some people are making it. The more important piece is the realization on all fronts that the way we collect employment data needs to change.” I disagree with her first statement and agree with the second. Too many of the recent graduates I have talked to are unemployed or underemployed, and seasoned practitioners I know have too many people looking for jobs that just aren't there. If you want to know about jobs, ask the people looking for them and the practitioners being asked about jobs that are not available.

Importantly, recent graduates who are lucky enough to get a job but are underemployed will not only be underpaid and frustrated, they will also not see a large enough caseload to learn and hone their skills. Sadly, underemployment adds two more casualties: the animals that may be misdiagnosed because of inexperience and the people who care for them, whether they are pets or part of our nation's food supply.

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1. Goldenson F. Veterinary workforce concerns (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2013;242:1048–1049.
2. Larkin M. Letting the numbers tell the story: AAVMC places new focus on collecting, disseminating data. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2013;242:1194–1197.

I wanted to respond to the recent *JAVMA* News story¹ “Letting the numbers tell the story,” which details efforts by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) to collect and disseminate more data on student debt and recent graduate employment. In the article, Dr. Deborah Kochevar, dean of the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine and AAVMC president, is quoted as saying that “unemployment is not the issue some people are making it.” This suggests to me that the AAVMC may have a very different definition of employment than some of us in small animal clinical practice have.

Before we can be satisfied with the percentage of recent graduates who have found employment, we must first ask, employed doing what? For example, I know of two very bright recent graduates who were employed as technicians for more than a year after veterinary school because they could not obtain employment as veterinarians. Does that constitute employed? Does that let them pay off their educational debts?

It seems to me that the market is saturated with veterinarians and that, faced with a large pool of desperate candidates, practice owners are able to offer lower pay and fewer benefits while demanding longer hours. The approach in some clinics I am familiar with is to offer employment with completely production-based compensation,

yet not scheduling any appointments for new employees and only letting them see walk-in clients. Does that constitute employed?

To me, employed means receiving sufficient remuneration to allow you to pay your living expenses, while also paying down your student loans, paying your veterinary-related and health insurance premiums, and contributing to your retirement. When you compare those costs with the typical starting salaries of new graduates, you'll start to see the sad state of affairs for associate veterinarians in small animal clinical practice today.

The recent economic downturn means that many owners are having more difficulties paying for care for their pets. With fewer people seeking veterinary care for their pets, there's going to be even less income available to pay associate veterinarians.

If we can decrease student debt, then possibly owners won't have to pay their associates quite as much, which means they can charge a bit less for their services, offer free veterinary care for low-income seniors once a week, or perhaps offer a sliding scale for clients who are financially strapped. Let's start taking care of one another in this world. We need each other. It's not just about the numbers.

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1. Larkin M. Letting the numbers tell the story: AAVMC places new focus on collecting, disseminating data. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2013;242:1194–1197.

Instructions for Writing a Letter to the Editor

Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor. Letters may not exceed 500 words and 6 references. Letters to the Editor must be original and cannot have been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Not all letters are published; all letters accepted for publication are subject to editing. Those pertaining to anything published in the *JAVMA* should be received within one month of the date of publication. Submission via e-mail (JournalLetters@avma.org) or fax (847-925-9329) is encouraged; authors should give their full contact information, including address, daytime telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address.

Letters containing defamatory, libelous, or malicious statements will not be published, nor will letters representing attacks on or attempts to demean veterinary societies or their committees or agencies. Viewpoints expressed in published letters are those of the letter writers and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policies of the AVMA.