

Letters to the Editor

Sow housing

Reading the recent commentary from Dr. Barry Kipperman,¹ one might conclude that animal welfare can easily be improved by making a simple change. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to caring for pigs. On-farm animal welfare represents a complex balance of numerous factors, and changes to one factor can lead to unintended consequences that make the overall situation worse, not better. Farms and housing systems are each unique and, as such, don't fit a simple, one-size-fits-all approach. In and of itself, an engineering solution such as the removal of individual stalls does not improve sow welfare and, in fact, ignores the science behind our current understanding of sow welfare and the vital role human caretakers play in any sow housing system. I urge those interested in this topic to examine the entire body of science on sow housing. A 2013 review² of 17 peer-reviewed papers published between 2005 and 2012 found similar productivity, physiology, health, and behavior among individually penned or grouped sows during gestation.² Other scientific reviews on sow welfare provide similar findings.³⁻⁵

It cannot be denied that societal influence exists, but it must be examined for its basis in science and knowledge. At the end of the day, what matters most is ensuring that the animals we use for food are raised with the daily care and constant respect they deserve. Swine veterinarians advocate for the pigs. We do that on the farm and in very real and practical ways, not as part of a social or political movement or a retail marketing campaign. We work diligently to ensure that farmers have the freedom to make decisions that will provide the best possible health and well-being for the animals in their care.

In promoting animal welfare, the veterinary profession should avoid establishing policy at the cost

of jeopardizing animal well-being. We should instead use evidence-based science and empirical knowledge to do the right thing for the animals we care for. As such, swine veterinarians take seriously our daily role working for the pigs and will continue to support policies and research that advance their care and welfare.

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1. Kipperman BS. The role of the veterinary profession in promoting animal welfare. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:502-504.
2. McGlone JJ. Review: updated scientific evidence on the welfare of gestating sows kept in different housing systems. *Prof Anim Scientist* 2013;29:189-198.
3. Barnett JL. A review of the welfare issues for sows and piglets in relation to housing. *Aust J Agric Res* 2001;52:1-28.
4. McGlone JJ. Review: compilation of the scientific literature comparing housing systems for gestating sows and gilts using measures of physiology, behavior, performance, and health. *Prof Anim Scientist* 2004;20:105-117.
5. Rhodes RT. A comprehensive review of housing for pregnant sows. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2005;227:1580-1590.

Understanding suicide among colleagues

I read with concern the recent report¹ on the high percentages of men and women in the veterinary profession who have experienced

depressive episodes or have considered or attempted suicide. It's easy to get lulled into the romantic notion that veterinary practice consists of pleasant hours working with charming animals and their devoted owners who always appreciate your dedicated efforts. But then reality sets in, and clients who claim their pets are members of the family suddenly decide your fees are too high or assume that you must have done something wrong when complications arise. Suddenly, the relationship turns unpleasant, and threats of a lawsuit or state board complaint come up. You're putting in long hours and working weekends, often with no vacation time, and are barely able to pay your expenses, let alone your student loans. You have neglected your loved ones and your own health and are physically and psychologically exhausted.

Few people outside the veterinary profession can understand what veterinarians can be up against. We need to find a way to support these people. Suicide is never the answer.

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1. Larkin M. Study: 1 in 6 veterinarians have considered suicide. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:707-709.

Editor's note:

The National Suicide Prevention Hotline website (www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) provides a number of useful resources

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 email (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 email 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.

for those who have experienced depressive episodes or considered suicide, including information on finding a therapist or support group.

Challenges facing veterinary education

Thirty years ago, when I joined the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, being dean seemed like fun... most of the time. Today, there is constant discord and uncertainty regarding educational reforms, budget shortfalls, escalating tuition and student debt, low starting salaries, questions about overproduction of graduates and market overcapacity, and more. Being dean now seems more like an ordeal.

Leading a veterinary college requires unshakable commitment, not just to one particular institution, but to the good of the entire profession. A key to progress is honest self-awareness; complacency and inaction can easily arise from a sense of false security caused by prior success. We can move forward or backward, but can never stand still, much as we may try.

Of the many complex issues facing veterinary education, the most disturbing is the current college business model, which I believe is unrealistic. Drastic decreases in public funding to higher education have led to serious budget woes. Veterinary colleges responded by increasing tuition and enrollment, but neither is a sustainable strategy. The steadily increasing debt-to-income ratio for new graduates will eventually cause potential students to conclude that a veterinary medical degree isn't worth the investment, leading to a decreased number of qualified applicants. Unfortunately, conventional management strategies—cutting supplies, maintenance, and equipment; increasing the use of online teaching; and securing private, government, and corporate funding—are themselves unlikely to provide a sufficient remedy for most colleges. Curtailing programs and eliminating faculty and staff positions may become necessary to achieve long-term financial stability. Establishing a business model that will be sustainable over the long term is essential.

The nation's veterinary colleges are interconnected through their membership in the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. Over the past 25 years, this association has sponsored a series of national studies that recommended strategic new directions for veterinary education. Yet, the colleges are still facing most of the same issues. It is always easier to proclaim principles than to apply them. Innovation and interinstitutional cooperation are vital to all veterinary colleges if they expect to remain successful in the 21st century.

Calvin Coolidge once wrote, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Veterinary education faces many difficult challenges today, but with persistence and determination, we can overcome them.

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