

# Letters to the Editor

## A second glance at financial expectations of first-year veterinary students

I was happy to read the recent report on debt and salary expectations of first-year students at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine.<sup>1</sup> However, because of the methods used, I believe the study may have assessed the ability of respondents to locate pertinent data on the Internet, rather than tested their actual knowledge of anticipated educational debt and starting salaries.

Two-thirds of the first-year students who responded to the survey were  $\leq 23$  years old, and none were  $\geq 33$  years old, indicating that all had been raised in the age of the Internet. Moreover, when asked to complete the survey, all of the respondents had already had been accepted into veterinary college. Thus, we can assume that they scored well on tests and had a preference for correct answers.

The survey was administered prior to the first day of class, and if the respondents were anything like the veterinarians and students I know, they likely were eager to perform well. The survey invitation was sent by email, suggesting that respondents likely had easy Internet access.

A Google search for “veterinary student debt” shows on the first page of results that the average educational debt of a 2013 veterinary school graduate was \$162,113,<sup>2</sup> and a similar search for “starting veterinary salaries” yields a link to an AVMA website providing mean salary for 2013 graduates who had accepted a full-time position.<sup>3</sup>

The study by Lim et al<sup>1</sup> “was designed to determine student awareness of the financial implications of pursuing a career in veterinary medicine” and concluded that “study participants were generally aware of the financial costs of their veterinary education and had realistic expectations for future salaries.” However, it is possible that at least

some of the respondents simply found the answers on the Internet as they responded to the survey. Asking respondents to complete the survey on the first day of orientation in paper form with no Internet access would have prevented this possibility.

A follow-up study assessing when respondents acquired information about anticipated debt and salaries, whether in high school, during their preveterinary studies, before applying for admission, or while responding to the survey, would be helpful. In addition, it would be useful to know whether financial expectations vary between students paying resident versus nonresident tuition and to extend the study to include students attending other veterinary colleges, particularly private colleges.

Thanks are owed to the authors for their study on financial expectations. However, caution is needed in interpreting their results.

Lance Roasa, DVM, MS  
Raymond, Neb

1. Lim CC, Schulhofer-Wohl S, Root Kustritz MV, et al. Financial expectations of first-year veterinary students. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;247:196–203.
2. AVMA. Financing your veterinary medical education. Available at: [www.avma.org/about/savma/studentfinancialresources/pages/default.aspx](http://www.avma.org/about/savma/studentfinancialresources/pages/default.aspx). Accessed Aug 18, 2015.
3. AVMA. Market research statistics—first year employment. Available at: [https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Statistics/Pages/Market-research-statistics-First-](https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Statistics/Pages/Market-research-statistics-First-year-employment.aspx)

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## The authors respond:

We appreciate Dr. Roasa’s thoughtful comments on our paper. Although we agree that it was possible for students to use information from the Internet to answer questions on our survey, we believe this scenario to be unlikely.

First, there was no advantage to giving “correct” answers to our survey. Respondents remained anonymous, and no rewards were provided for their involvement.

Second, the survey invitation was designed to encourage students to provide information about their own information and attitudes. The invitation stated: “The purpose of the research is to gather data about the economic situation and financial attitudes of veterinary students at the beginning of their veterinary education. We plan to use the information to assess the overall impact of veterinary school debt and determine whether there are other factors that contribute to this debt.” We believe that this wording emphasized the importance of providing the respondent’s own data and that most people would interpret the invitation to mean that we were seeking their thoughts rather than information obtained by searching the Internet.

Third, the range of answers we received makes it appear unlikely that students used Internet data to answer the survey questions.

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For example, while respondents on average reported that they expected the typical student in the class to incur veterinary school debt of \$166,415, responses to this question ranged from \$60,000 to \$300,000, with a standard deviation of \$49,582. Further, the 65 respondents reported 15 different answers to this question, all of the answers were multiples of \$1,000, and all but one of the answers were multiples of \$5,000. It seems unlikely that students would have produced this pattern of answers if they had merely looked up the \$162,113 figure cited by Dr. Roasa. Answers to other questions also showed relatively large ranges, large standard deviations, and common use of round numbers that would not match published estimates.

Still, the overlap between the mean estimates obtained in our survey and estimates from previous surveys is not surprising. Students who researched the costs and earning potential of a veterinary career before entering veterinary school were likely to have read the same studies cited in our report and by

Dr. Roasa. We would expect this reading to influence the responses that those students provided in our survey.

We agree that further research into veterinary student debt is needed and are encouraged to see that this study is generating ideas for future investigations.

*Christine Lim, DVM*  
*Margaret Root Kustritz, DVM, PhD*  
*Department of Veterinary*  
*Clinical Sciences*

*Laura Molgaard, DVM*  
*Office of Academic and*  
*Student Affairs*

*David Lee, DVM, MBA*  
*Veterinary Medical Center*  
*College of Veterinary Medicine*  
*University of Minnesota*  
*Saint Paul, Minn*

*Sam Schulhofer-Wohl, PhD*  
*Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*  
*Minneapolis, Minn*

*The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis or the Federal Reserve System.*

## **Hidden costs of vaccination clinics**

It seems to me that vaccination clinics offering core and non-core vaccinations for pets at a steep discount are proliferating at a rapid pace. I believe, however, that these clinics pose a threat to the health of pets and the veterinary profession as a whole because they imply that the most important thing owners can do to keep their pets healthy is give them yearly vaccinations. This of course is not true.

Although these vaccinations are typically accompanied by a wellness examination (often billed as free), I wonder how often a complete history is obtained or a thorough examination is performed. How often are routine fecal examinations performed, especially on puppies, and what happens when a health problem is identified or an owner has a health-related question? Is a true veterinarian-client-patient relationship established?

It is my belief that vaccination clinics negatively affect the public perception of veterinarians and threaten the long-term survival of high-quality veterinary medicine.

*Allan Simon, DVM*  
*Rockaway Park, NY*