

Letters to the Editor

Looking beyond debt and income

I found the *JAVMA* News stories “Divided by debt”¹ and “Decline in real veterinary incomes continues despite strong job market,”² which appeared together in the same issue, to be quite interesting. Numerous factors affect the cost of educating veterinarians and the income they will receive after graduation. As a profession, however, we must remember that the clinical services we provide are often discretionary. Thus, what services we can provide depend both on the cost of doing business and the amount that clients are willing and able to pay. We all want to offer the very best for our clients, but we are beholden to their ability to pay.

As a practice owner for more than 20 years, I have seen the profound impact that increases in the cost of doing business have had on veterinary care. As technology has advanced, it has become commonplace for practices to offer specialized diagnostic testing and advanced care. But, these technologies come at a cost, and it is sometimes difficult to pass those costs on to consumers.

In my view, training of new veterinarians has come to rely heavily on these advanced technologies and, seemingly, less on the art of medicine. New graduates seem less confident in their skills and require access to the technology to which they have grown accustomed, but they often seem unaware of the basic costs of doing business. I have also witnessed a change from using problem-solving skills to obtaining an answer online with little regard for other options that may be available. Although debt and income are challenges facing the veterinary profession, many other factors and stresses on the profession need to be addressed in real-life terms before we can solve the debt and income prob-

lems brought to light in these articles.

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1. Larkin M. Divided by debt. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;252:14-21.
2. Nolen RS. Decline in real veterinary incomes continues despite strong job market. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;252:22-23.

Empathy extends beyond companion animals

I was dismayed by the recent letter¹ from Dr. Michael Fox in which he described his response to findings of the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study. In his letter, Dr. Fox suggested that higher well-being scores for food animal veterinarians, compared with scores for veterinarians in other segments of the profession, was likely due to the fact that “[a]nimals raised for food are likely easier to objectify as commodities and seem less likely to raise the sorts of emotional dynamics associated with companion animal patients.” This conclusion seems presumptuous and, in my own experience as a swine veterinarian, wrong. Although food animal veterinarians do not always think of their patients on an individual basis, there is no less of a veterinary-client-

patient relationship than there is for companion animal veterinarians. Our clients manage their herds and flocks with the knowledge that individuals are assessed as part of the health and well-being of a group. Food animal veterinarians also develop close, emotional ties with the clients they serve. In my field, veterinarians work closely with clients on a personal and business level, assisting in critical decisions that affect the life and livelihood of those clients and their families. During the 2013 porcine epidemic diarrhea virus outbreak, food animal veterinarians dealt with a disease for which there was no vaccine and no immediate treatment. Being the attending veterinarian for affected herds was heart-wrenching, because I knew that many of these animals would not survive and many clients would see their animals suffer and die. For food animal veterinarians, support of a herd’s owner and caretakers is paramount to returning the herd to good health, and that takes an emotional toll. Veterinarians’ compassion for animals and their emotional connection to clients and owners are not species-dependent.

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1. Fox MW. The cost of empathy (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;252:927.

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 1 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.

When it comes to empathy, we're more alike than different

Embedded in the recent letter by Dr. Michael W. Fox¹ is one of the most toxic myths of the anti-agriculture rhetoric prevalent today: the myth that food animal veterinarians lack empathy for animals. I refer specifically to Dr. Fox's musings on why the recent Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study found that food animal veterinarians scored higher on well-being than did veterinarians in other sectors of the profession.² He wrote that "[a]nimals raised for food are likely easier to objectify as commodities and seem less likely to raise the sorts of emotional dynamics associated with companion animal patients and their owners, dynamics that call for greater degrees of empathy and understanding."

Having spent nearly 20 years in mixed animal practice, I am confident that food and mixed-animal practitioners are every bit as dedicated as companion animal practitioners to helping individual animals. They also think in terms of populations, so that fewer individuals are affected in the future, similar to my current focus on public health.

There are many reasons why food animal veterinarians might feel less stress than their colleagues in companion animal practice. These include the com-

munity of country life, having fewer clients whom one sees more frequently, time spent outdoors, the physical work, and the gratification of helping people with their livelihoods. From personal experience, however, I know that food and mixed-animal veterinarians are subject to many of the same stressors as all veterinarians are, including long, difficult hours, dealing with mistakes or loss, and feeling a loss of control when clients don't follow advice. Stressors unique to food animal practice include external forces, such as commodity prices, and the gravity of making judgments that affect the financial security of families.

But we are all so much more alike than different. My experience over a career involving extensive interactions with all kinds of practitioners is that veterinarians are veterinarians. This myth of a difference in empathy or attitude towards animals is unsubstantiated and unfair.

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1. Fox MW. The cost of empathy (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;252:927.
2. Nolen RS. Mental health, well-being problem serious, not dire: study. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;252:392-393.