

Food for thought for Food animal veterinarians

Professionalism in the next century

The veterinary profession has made great progress in the past century, yielding over 50,000 members with various specialities and avenues of service other than private or government practice. Advances in technology and methods of serving the public now allow students of veterinary medicine more opportunities to choose from on graduation.

However, the question remains: Are these graduates—the veterinarians of today—truly professional people? Perhaps we should review the meaning of the word “profession.” The following definition¹ is one that I like: “If there is such a thing as a profession as a concept distinct from a vocation, it must consist in the ideals which its members maintain, the dignity of character which they bring to performance of their duties, and the austerity of self-imposed ethical standards. To constitute a true profession, there must be ethical tradition so potent as to bring into conformity members whose personal standards of conduct are at a lower level and to have an elevating and ennobling effect on those members. A profession cannot be created by resolution or become such overnight. It requires many years for its development and they may be years of self-denial, years when success by base means is scorned, years when no results bring honor ex-

cept those free from the taint of unworthy methods.”

A review of the past performance of the veterinary profession clearly demonstrates that, in the 20th century, veterinarians have closely adhered to this definition of a profession. They developed professionally without guidelines or examples, largely because the veterinary profession has primarily come about in the past 100 years. A great salute to their foresightedness and perseverance is in order. The profession, during the early part of the 20th century, consisted largely of food animal practitioners, academicians, and a small number of government veterinarians. It has only been during the past 3 decades that so many other segments of the profession have developed. Furthermore, it is truly possible that many other specialities in veterinary medicine will continue to develop in the next century.

Like veterinary medicine, the entire human health field in the United States is continually changing. It is now possible for every citizen to have some degree of health service. However, when these services are scrutinized, questions arise as to whether true *professions* can exist under such revised schemes for health services. For instance, the convention of allowing each person to choose his or her own doctor, who, in turn, conducts a practice and provides services dictated by their own professionalism, has rapidly changed. Now, health service organizations and hospitals dictate who a person may use as their physician and

the dimension of services rendered—and this may only be the beginning. There are always more changes forthcoming from insurance companies and health service organizations; in the past, these changes have resulted in many physicians giving up their practices and joining a managed health service organization. Nowadays, it is difficult to find anyone who can unequivocally state, “Doctor X is my doctor.”

Veterinary medicine and veterinarians have not been subjected to the same degree of control over their services; however, the era when veterinarians used any drugs available, the way they wanted to use them, even those concocted in their own practices, is over. Governmental agencies supervise many services veterinarians perform for the purpose of food and employee safety. Still, the legal aspect of practice remains a worry to veterinarians in that litigation is now a continual threat. Because of such problems, private practitioners—the last of the free enterprisers—are slowly disappearing.

Are the good old days gone in veterinary medicine? It may be true that veterinarians of today are faced with entirely different problems than their predecessors; however, on the brighter side, clients are better educated, a whole gauntlet of new drugs is available, and new diagnostic equipment and well-trained paraprofessional help is accessible to make practice much more exciting than in the past. Food animal practitioners are now servicing large numbers of animals on each unit; thus, their services

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must encompass all facets of production. It is truly preventive medicine, in most cases established by herd status instead of a specific animal.

On the subject of professional communications, it is my opinion that veterinarians today gather primarily for continuing education instead of merely socializing, as was typical in the past. Thus, it is common for practitioners not to know their nearby colleagues. This differs from the past, when practitioners knew all of those in a given practice area. Further, many specialties have separated veterinarians, and, because of lack of commonality, veterinarians have become primarily associated only with other veterinarians that share the same interests.

Yet, despite the isolation that specialization may bring, observations of present-day veterinarians involved in the many forms of practice and in the many other

facets of veterinary medicine indicate that they possess as much professionalism as veterinarians in the past. In some cases, their dress may be more casual, but all the earmarks of a professional are possessed by the majority of today's veterinarians. In visiting with members of examining boards of state associations and with members of the Judicial Council of the AVMA, it appears that the number of violations of veterinary medical ethics has not increased in the past several years.

The fact that a high percentage of all veterinarians belong to the AVMA speaks well for the influence organized veterinary medicine has on graduates. Likewise, the influence that colleges of veterinary medicine have on students indicates that a greater degree of professionalism is instilled prior to graduation.

As the 21st century approaches, there will be more and

more veterinarians, and there will be many changes within the profession. Hopefully, these changes will not affect the degree of professionalism that present-day veterinarians maintain. The fact that graduates possess a professional degree instills in each of them, regardless of the path of their career, a pride and an understanding that they are professional people. Hopefully, they will adhere to the precepts of the profession to make them all outstanding professionals. They are a chosen few.

To face tomorrow with the thought of using the methods of yesterday is to envision our profession at a standstill. Even that which we now do well must be done better tomorrow. That is the challenge for a professional.

Reference

1. Broude JM, ed. *The speaker's encyclopedia*. 1st ed. New York: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1955;306.

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