

Expanding flexibility in veterinary college accreditation and veterinarian licensing to help the profession meet society's needs and address challenges

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Ultimately, the value of any profession depends on its ability to address the needs of society^{1,2}; its survival depends on its ability to address the challenges it faces. In viewing the current state of the veterinary profession, we contend that changes are urgently needed if the profession is to continue addressing societal needs and ongoing challenges. For > 20 years, the flexibility of professional education and licensing embraced by the engineering profession has been discussed as a model that is exquisitely responsive to the changing needs of society and extremely effective in meeting new challenges.³⁻⁷ We believe that the argument for the veterinary profession to adopt similar flexibility in models of professional education and licensing is more compelling than ever.

The veterinary profession exists to serve society by promoting the health of animals, people, and ecosystems, with health in this context defined as the capacity for maintaining homeostasis or sustainability while attaining reasonable and ethical goals at all scales of human endeavor. The increasing complexity and unrelenting expansion of biological, physical, social, and economic connectedness (ie, globalization) in today's world has imposed new health risks at all levels of biological organization and ecological scale. To remain relevant, therefore, the veterinary profession must do more to develop and apply its knowledge and skills. However, the rapidly expanding body of knowledge, increasingly sophisticated technology, and advancements in clinical skills mean that mastering specific fields in the medical and health sciences will require ever greater specialization.

At the same time, conventional veterinary curricula can, in our view, no longer produce, in a cost-effective manner, graduates with the entry-level knowledge and skills in existing and emerging fields of practice necessary to respond to societal needs. The growth in student tuition has severely curtailed

opportunities for new veterinary graduates and has, in some instances, pushed them into fields that are sufficiently lucrative to repay student loans, to the potential detriment of less lucrative fields such as one health and biomedical research.

Current criteria for accreditation of veterinary programs require colleges of veterinary medicine to ensure coverage of conventional clinical fields, which limits the ability of these colleges to enhance existing or develop new programs to respond to evolving societal needs. Similarly, current licensing requirements for veterinarians focus on the broad range of clinical practice, requiring students to concentrate their efforts in these fields.

The veterinary profession is similar to the engineering profession in that each has a body of knowledge—comparative medicine for the veterinary profession and physical sciences for the engineering profession—that is essential for successful engagement in professional activities. However, the engineering profession has developed educational models that allow students, once they have mastered this baseline body of knowledge, to specialize in specific fields within the profession (eg, mechanical, civil, and electrical engineering) and licensing models that focus on the required knowledge for success in each of these specialized fields.

We believe that the public and veterinary profession would be well served if, in a similar way, the bodies responsible for the accreditation of colleges of veterinary medicine (specifically, the AVMA Council on Education) and for licensing of veterinarians (ie, state and provincial licensing agencies) would assume leadership roles in promoting greater flexibility in accreditation of colleges (specifically in regard to the veterinary curriculum) and licensing of graduates. Such flexibility would, we believe, allow the profession to better respond to societal needs while also helping it

address the challenges, such as high student debt, it currently faces. Specifically, it would allow the profession to develop creative and innovative ways to address the high cost of the present educational system and high student debt while boosting the competence of new graduates in emerging fields, making the road to specialization in a chosen field more efficient, ensuring that the one health movement becomes more than just public health, and expanding the capacity of veterinary academia to contribute to medical research. Ultimately, such flexibility would, we believe, allow the veterinary profession to flourish as never before.

References

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