



Dr. Morse with one of his patients—a royal bengal tiger cub

Embracing Diversity in Veterinary Medicine

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. EVAN M. MORSE

Travelling from the St. Louis International Airport to the AVMA Convention last summer, my colleague Renee and I shared a cab with Dr. Evan Morse and his family. Conversation turned to our backgrounds and endeavors and I found myself listening closely as Dr. Morse described his life-long dedication to civil rights and his corollary devotion to veterinary medicine.

The cab ride was much too short to hear the whole narrative, but Dr. Morse and I arranged to talk again. The subsequent interview allowed me to listen to a compelling and inspiring story as well as share it with the readers of Today's Veterinary Practice.—Kelly Soldavin, Editorial Director

“I am convinced, though, that I must do what I can to enable as many qualified minority students as possible to enter veterinary schools in order to ameliorate the woeful inadequacies of racial and ethnic diversity that exist in the profession”—Dr. Evan Morse

You began advocating for equality while you were in high school—can you describe your experiences as a student activist?

I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, the cradle of the Confederacy. My father was a barber and my mother was a domestic worker.

I was inspired by hometown figures, such as Arthur Ashe, a schoolmate, and Spottswood Robinson, the civil rights lawyer for *Brown versus Board of Education*. During my high school years I participated in lunch counter sit-in demonstrations and department store picketing. I also spearheaded the integration of the state science and mathematics academic conferences.

Subsequently, when I studied veterinary medicine at Tuskegee Institute, I participated in voter registration drives, political activism on campus, and the historic civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama (March 21–25, 1965).

Why did you decide to attend Tuskegee Institute and pursue a career in veterinary medicine?

My early formative years were powerfully influenced by animals—I spent more time with all types of animals in my community and on my grandmother's farm than with friends or with other activities.

In my own way, I sensed that animals not only had feelings similar to ours, but the ones that were more evolutionarily developed (mammals) had forms of self-awareness. As a teenager, many of the animals I spent time with clearly showed feelings and a sense of self that entranced me. These intrinsic qualities made me decide to devote my professional career to the care of animals.

When it came to deciding where to pursue my education, Tuskegee Institute was hardly a matter of choice. Of the 19 veterinary colleges in the U.S. in the early 60s, Tuskegee's School of Veterinary Medicine, for all practical purposes, was the only one that offered an African American student a reasonable chance of admission.

How were you able to integrate your career as a veterinarian with your pursuit for diversity within the profession?

I came to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1968 to practice veterinary medicine. In the 43 years that followed, I was constantly struck by the fact that of the 3300 veterinarians in the state of Ohio, fewer than 10 were African American. I felt compelled to expend as much energy as I could on promoting diversity and inclusion within the veterinary profession and community.

During my first years in practice, I became staff veterinarian for one of the major Cleveland television affiliates and then filled the same role at another station a few years later. Both of these positions entailed weekly live television appearances. I also performed veterinary services for the Cleveland Aquarium, Sea World, Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and many local police departments.

On the professional level, I became president of the Cleveland Academy of Veterinary Medicine and served as chairman of the Diversity Committee of the Ohio Veterinary Medical Association, receiving the Distinguished Service Award for “promoting diversity and inclusion in the veterinary profession.” In 2004, I chaired the Iverson Bell Veterinary Diversity Symposium. Sensing a need to combine more scholarship with my practical experience in the profession, I completed a master's degree with a specialization in diversity management from Cleveland State University in 2008.

I was appointed to the Task Force on Diversity of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and have been an impetus behind the diversity symposiums held at every AVMA Convention since 2005, chairing and presenting at all seven. This year I was honored to receive the AVMA President's Award for “four decades of tireless efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the veterinary profession.”

I am deeply grateful for the recognition bestowed upon me by the leadership and colleagues in my profession.

Have there been other passions you've pursued during your career as a veterinarian?

My nonprofessional passions are fly fishing and jazz music. I served as president of the Cleveland Trout Club and the Northeast Ohio Jazz Society. Both of these activities have enabled me to develop long-lasting friendships with people that have provided a wonderful



Three high school students who volunteer with Dr. Morse every Saturday; they all plan to be veterinarians: (left to right) Fallon Greer, Ariel Brent, Dr. Morse, and Naomi Hill

contrast with my professional involvement with and devotion to nonhuman creatures. A great deal of my emotional fulfillment in life has been based on interacting with my fly-fishing partners and great jazz artists who I've presented to Cleveland audiences.

How do you define "diversity" and what it encompasses with regard to veterinary medicine?

The United States is undergoing a profound and deep-rooted metamorphosis in its population and culture. This transformation is the greatest economic and cultural shift this country ever has known and diversity is the nexus of this change.

One of the major difficulties in discussions surrounding diversity is its very definition. At its core, diversity means embracing differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, health, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, religion, physical size, education level, job level and function, personality traits, and other human differences.

Yet there is also the paradox of diversity:

- We are each unique and like no one else
- We are each like some people and unlike other people
- We are each like all other people.

Diversity in the veterinary profession means recognition of differences in the mainstream realities in which the profession functions. An estimated 63% of U.S. households own a pet, and practically all Americans depend on animals for food. It is reasonable to believe that minority groups should be represented in the veterinary profession in a fair and dignified manner.

Consider the representation of African Americans in the motion picture industry as a parallel example. Before the 1960s, African Americans were presented as stereotypical and subservient on the silver screen, such as the roles performed by actress Butterfly McQueen as Prissy in *Gone With the Wind* and an unnamed character in *Mildred Pierce*. After the artistic abilities of minority groups began

to be recognized by the industry, American audiences saw the greatness of such actors as Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and others in distinguished roles.

Similarly, in the veterinary profession, recognition of the need for greater minority representation will lead to the recruitment of larger numbers of outstanding minority candidates who will make their mark on the profession. The responsibility for promoting diversity in the veterinary profession rests on the shoulders of all members of society.

What is embodied in the present striking lack of diversity in the veterinary profession is clearly stated in the very first sentence of my master's thesis, *Minority Student Perceptions of the Veterinary Profession* (ohiolink.edu/etd/view.cgi?acc_num=csu1232135567): "Veterinary medicine is the least racially and ethnically diverse profession in the United States today."

What is the most exciting change you've seen in veterinary medicine during your career?

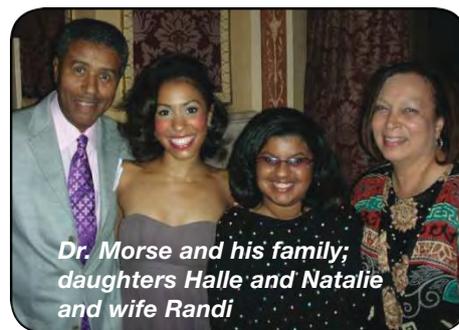
The most exciting development in the veterinary field has been the coming of age of veterinary medicine, both in terms of enhanced technology as well as in terms of the growing recognition of the importance of the relationship between humans and animals.

A major thrust behind this latter development was the increased awareness of veterinary medicine cultivated by James Alfred Wright (pen name, James Herriot) in his marvelous books about veterinary practice in the English countryside (*All Creatures Great and Small*, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, *All Things Wise and Wonderful*, and *The Lord God Made Them All*).

Today, in the eyes of all, veterinary medicine is viewed as a medical profession on par with human medical practice. The entire transformation can be summed up in the phrase, "The valorization of veterinary medicine."

What do you feel is the most important issue(s) facing the veterinary profession?

Despite the well-meaning efforts of leading educators and practitioners, we must face the dismal statistic that over 90% of veterinarians in the United States are white. Instead of pointing fingers, we must recognize that society as a whole has failed to swell the ranks of veterinarians with minority graduates.



Dr. Morse and his family; daughters Halle and Natalie and wife Randi

My master's thesis (see above) explores this issue

in depth and offers many suggestions for addressing the inequity. The two most important factors I found when it came to a minority student deciding to pursue a career in veterinary medicine were:

1. Acquaintance with a practicing veterinarian
2. Availability to shadow or intern with a veterinarian

If veterinary professionals/practices are interested in supporting and increasing awareness about diversity in veterinary medicine, how do they go about doing so?

Although there is much discussion about how a diversified workforce can lead to enhanced innovation and creativity, few practices or companies/organizations achieve this reality. They

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