

Evolution of a Career in Veterinary Medicine

Hands On, Hands Off

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Why can't a veterinary career be just about helping animals? Isn't that why the majority of us were drawn into the field—because we "loved animals" and wanted to help them?

If memory serves me correctly, that is why I endured three years of undergraduate classes and then four years of veterinary school. Some of us continued with additional training, such as master's degrees, doctorates, internships, residencies, or fellowships.

Regardless of the path that led us to become the veterinarians we are today, I truly believe most of us would agree that the motivating force that propelled our educational journey was our love for animals and our desire to work with them.

HORSES VERSUS HUMANS

So, if our love for animals is what led us to our chosen field, why are we spending less and less time with our patients and more and more time with humans, such as clients, employees, vendors, students, colleagues, and volunteers?

When I reflect on my personal journey, the early years were the greatest. I was young, enthusiastic, energetic, and thought I could rule the equine world! I worked on horses day and night throughout my internship, surgical residency, and the early years of establishing my own business. My technical and practical skills were at their highest when I was hands on with my patients all day every day.

However, as the practice grew and we hired more veterinarians, technical staff, and clerical staff, I began spending more time dealing with all the people but less time with the horses. How can it be that I joined this profession to work with horses and instead, as my career is peaking, I'm "working" with humans? This was not what I expected or intended when I began my journey to become a veterinarian.

THE DARK AGES STILL EXIST

As I wrestle with these thoughts, I pause to think about our profession and how it has changed. The veterinary profession was once dominated by men who worked on "all creatures great and small," with a strong focus on farm animals. They were available to their clients 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Now the profession is well on its way to being

dominated by women, and most of us specialize in a specific species. There is rarely a 24/7 work schedule; rather, each doctor designs a schedule that balances his or her work life with family life.

However, there is still one group of veterinarians that toil in the dark ages: equine practitioners. We continue to primarily travel to our clients' farms, and are available to them at any time. We rarely have a local emergency clinic to send our patients to after hours; therefore, we have the dreaded "on call" schedule.

And if equine practitioners work in a solo practice, they frequently have to partner with another practitioner in order to provide this level of care. It is only the large equine group practices that have enough veterinarians under one roof to share the load, allowing for reasonable "on-call" schedules.

FINDING A SOLUTION: POSSIBLE?

Why do equine practitioners continue working in these conditions? Is it our egos that make us feel that we need to be available to our clients 24/7? Is it fear that we will lose a client if we aren't available but another colleague is? How did our companion animal colleagues figure this out successfully? Surely, with technology, telemedicine, and the "dual centric" attitude of later generations, we can figure this out sooner or later. If not, the equine practitioner will likely fade away.

The equine veterinary workforce is becoming primarily female and, as women, we want more from life than just to work. Fortunately, at our practice we have adequate demand for services to support a team of veterinarians who share the emergency calls, allowing us the balance we desire. But, what about the rural regions where there is simply not enough work to support more than one veterinarian? What then?

EMBRACING WHERE YOU ARE NOW

Bringing this back to the horse/human balance in practice, a small comfort I derive from the shift from "horse centric" to "human centric" is the fact that I originally joined this profession to help horses, and now I am doing that daily—in a much grander way than what I could accomplish on my own. I am teamed up with five other female equine veterinarians (plus four interns) and together we help a significant number of horses every day.

Each of us has our own journey in life, and our journey may take a different path than what we envisioned early in our careers, bringing us to an entirely different destination. It is important that we each embrace the journey, make it our own, and stay true to what drew us into this profession: our love for animals and our passion to help them. Odds are, if we achieve that, we remain headed toward our “true north,” with the ability to look forward to our work each and every day.

THE BIG PICTURE IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

If you haven't guessed, I had some tunnel vision—it took me many years to realize there was a veterinary world outside of equine practice.

One of the greatest things about the NAVC is that it opened my eyes to the diversity within veterinary medicine. I now appreciate the vast array of veterinary professions, including companion animal, food animal, and exotic animal practice; forensic and holistic medicine; consulting; academia; industry; and research, not to mention all the specialty colleges within these areas.

And there are the critical professions that round out the veterinary health care team—veterinary technicians (and assistants), practice managers, and reception staff, plus the associations that support those in these fields.

The reality is that our industry is amazing and the opportunities are abundant. When you become a part of the North American Veterinary Community and engage in its many offerings, the possibilities are endless. We are lucky, we are fortunate, and we are blessed.

I hope all of you stay true to your passion and embrace the changes that happen throughout your careers. Remember: even when your hands are not directly helping your species of choice, you are still impacting the animal world and paving the way for the generations behind us.

—K. Leann Kuebelbeck
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