



HERE'S A SECRET ...

Our Profession Is a Small Town

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“Dana.” (Pause.) “Dana!” (Ears send signal to brain that familiar sound was detected.) “DANA!” (Name recognition finally occurs.) Realizing I may have missed someone calling my name 2 to 27 times, I scanned the crowd, begging my often-faulty internal facial recognition software to work its magic. As it processed, I caught sight of the woman waving at me. (Match!) Enthusiastically greeting me was none other than the first veterinarian I had worked for as an assistant in high school. We hugged, laughed, and spent a moment catching up. I left with that “it’s a small world” feeling we often get.

And maybe veterinary medicine is a small world—or, more accurately, a small town. There are just over 120 000 veterinarians and 200 000 veterinary nurses and other support staff in the United States, and 1.8 million veterinarians globally. Our veterinary populations match the size of Topeka, Kansas; Richmond, Virginia; and Phoenix, Arizona, respectively. So, was it really a coincidence that I ran into my first mentor? Like other small-town communities, our profession is more likely to have overlap in how we value animals, education, and career aspirations. We have neighborhoods (Surgeon Circle and General Practitioner Park) where the inhabitants have niche qualities and experiences. We even use the same lingo (“I have a GSD with signs of PTE”). I see ways we can use these shared attributes to make our small town the best possible.

First, you never know who will leave and reenter your professional life. You may leave “Emergency Room Road” and head into a new area of practice only to run back into a beloved colleague. You’ll also run into people with whom you didn’t have great relationships; and while some bridges do need to be burned, always remember to save that for when you truly need it. You just never know where you’ll see someone from our small town again.

Additionally, if you were ever the new kid in class, you know that coming into a small, tight-knit group can be intimidating. You may bring different experience, culture, knowledge, or skin color, and it may be difficult to find your place. We all need to do more to be the veterinary welcome wagon. Small towns that thrive are diverse, welcoming, friendly, and accommodating.

Lastly, don’t fall prey to the gossip that poisons many small communities. What an owner said another veterinarian said about you has always suffered from a bad case of the “telephone game.” When you assume others have the same good intentions you do, you will benefit from a positive mental outlook and, more than not, find it is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Veterinary medicine can be an idyllic place if we allow ourselves to embrace the best of small-town moments like hugging your first veterinary mentor, giving a professional “tour” to a new grad through mentorship, and calling your colleague across town to straighten out communication glitches—and share a laugh about the bad food at the local CE event! **TVP**

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This column is titled “The Secret Life Vets” so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.



Ben Kirchner