



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Advice For Early Career Veterinarians in Mixed Practice

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Preparing for a career in mixed animal practice is an increasingly popular choice for veterinary medical school graduates, according to Gillian Perkins, DVM, the associate hospital director at the Cornell University Hospital for Animals in Ithaca, New York. In her annual 2-week rotation for equine ambulatory medicine, often at least half of the fourth-year student participants intend to enter positions in mixed practice. When queried about their choice, many of these students indicate that they want to broaden their experience base to allow for more choices in their future.

When asked about her choice of a mixed practice associate position at Red Oak Animal Hospital in Bucyrus, Kansas, Kaylen Capps, DVM, a 2023 graduate of Kansas State University, says, “I believed that I would enjoy caring for multiple species of animals and that working in mixed animal practice would allow me to become a more well-rounded veterinarian.”

Of the more than 82 000 private practice veterinarians in the United States at the beginning of 2024, just 4667 (4.6%) are mixed animal doctors. Food animal practice has 3451 (3.6%) of the total, and equine practice has just 3972 (4.1%), with the vast majority of 68 434 (70.4%) serving companion animals.¹ However,

members of the American Association of Equine Practitioners are frequently mixed animal practitioners, with about 20% of members reporting that less than half of their case load is horses.²

AN INCREASING NEED

As hobby farms have risen in popularity in suburban areas, many families have small numbers of farm animals as pets. It is not uncommon to see a few llamas, sheep, goats, or donkeys populating a small green space as one drives through the suburban/rural landscape. In fact, “part-time farming has increased throughout the developed countries since World War II. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the United States experienced a large and widespread increase in the number of farms of less than 50 acres, most of which were ‘hobby’ farms and were located in rural-urban fringe areas of growing nonmetropolitan regions.”³

These animals all require veterinary care, which can be increasingly difficult to obtain as veterinarians become more focused on treating only 1 or 2 species. Despite the many differences between species, veterinarians are well-prepared to administer care to all creatures due to their broad-based education. Farm animal species being kept as pets are frequently considered family members, and a companion animal veterinarian is well-suited in



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the communication skills and empathy needed to successfully treat them.

THE BENEFITS

As a part of a family that has owned and operated a mixed animal practice since 1947, Kelsey DeLand, DVM, the owner of Ida Veterinary Clinic in Ida, Michigan, admits that her position is unusual. “That being said,” she says, “they urged me to do pretty much anything else (pathology was pushed pretty hard!). Yet, I could not deny the draw of mixed animal medicine. It was the variety of cases and the ‘best of both worlds’ benefits that drew me to mixed animal medicine.”

DeLand is also someone who gets bored fairly easily, so “having an ever-changing schedule with ever-changing species as patients keeps my mind engaged and happy,” she says. “Also, given that my education encompassed all species, I figured I might as well put every bit of it I can to use and get my money’s worth.”

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Her favorite thing about mixed practice? The variety. “Two weeks ago I delivered a foal, 2 calves, triplet goat kids, twin lambs, and a litter of puppies in the span of 48 hours,” she shares. “Those were long days, but I don’t think any job gets much cooler than that. I also really enjoy the relationships I’m able to build with clients both in the clinic and on-farm: Many clients tell me how much they love having a ‘1-stop shop’ vet, especially one who will see their small animals on farm visits, and I love being able to make people’s lives easier!”

As a new graduate working in mixed practice, Capps is happy with her choice. “It brings me joy to be able to serve most or all of the client’s animals; it builds a personal connection when you get to know and care for so many families,” she says. “Medically, it exposes me to a broad caseload, which constantly fuels my curiosities

to dive deeper into the medicine, learn continuously, and elevate the care for patients.”

When a veterinarian loves country life, it is also good to know that most mixed animal practices are in relatively rural areas, which often provide a slower-paced lifestyle and a strong, neighborly community. A simpler lifestyle closer to nature can also be very calming and attractive as a place to raise a family. Residents are usually very grateful to have the services of a veterinarian, and are welcoming to new professionals.

As Ellie Reedy, DVM, co-owner with her husband of Mountainview Veterinary Service in Twin Bridges, Montana, says, “The variety of patients is challenging and rewarding. Working for rural people is very fulfilling, and living in rural America is an ideal place to be.”

THE CHALLENGES

Mixed practice, however, is not for the faint of heart. Scheduling can be difficult, as emergencies may take the doctor out on an ambulatory call first thing in the morning, making it hard to get to the office for scheduled small animal appointments. Staying up to date with cutting-edge medicine in each of several species can also be difficult, but it is important to remember that common things are seen commonly, and rare things are seen rarely. Many resources are electronically available to ease those difficult moments, and mentors are often readily available with a phone call.

“Sometimes I do think it would be easier to be able to focus on 1 species,” DeLand shares. “As more of a generalist, I often have to look things up just to double-check my thought process, as my brain just can’t hold everything that I want it to, or at least I can’t recall it as quickly as I want to some days.”

Capps’ recommendations for others considering a career in mixed practice are inspiring. “Do not be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone; you are capable of learning anything you do not already know,” she says. “Seek mentorship and always be a good colleague. As a student, expose yourself to as many practices as you can with the aim of developing an idea of what type of practice you wish to be a part of, as well as what type of practitioner you wish to be; there are many varieties of mixed animal practices, which means there is likely a fit for you and your profile of interests.”

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TIPS FOR SUCCESS

DeLand has been practicing and accumulating experience for 8 years, but she still finds time to stay up to date on all the new things for each species. How so? “So much CE! That, and active participation in many vet-to-vet Facebook groups. I average anywhere from 75 to 100 hours of CE a year; typically, 1 major conference, monthly meetings with my local veterinary association, and lots of online CE through various outlets. I am also proud to say I have really good relationships with all of my drug company

representatives, and rely on them to get me information about new products they offer.”

It can be hard to have all the equipment and medications for all the potential medical situations that might be encountered in mixed practice, but many conditions are treated in a similar way. “Figuring out the most efficient way to pack the truck for field calls involving both small and large animals” is Capps’ least favorite thing about mixed practice.

Emergencies are often some of the most rewarding work that veterinarians do, as they sustain the human–animal bond and relieve suffering. However, in a small practice, finding ways to have time away from this responsibility can be tough. “I’m a solo mixed animal practitioner in an area where not many vets will see nonhorse large animals (or the vets who will see farm animals won’t see horses),” DeLand says. “So, it is difficult to find coverage when I am ready to take a break from 24/7 on-call.” Sharing through an emergency cooperative can help with this struggle.

For those excited about treating a variety of species in mixed animal practice, DeLand has this advice: “Be open to new challenges! I was always very upfront with clients when I was trying something new, and I was surprised with how open they were with allowing me to learn and practice veterinary medicine. The fact of mixed animal veterinary medicine is that we all have to try procedures for the first time sometimes, and that ‘first time’ isn’t always in veterinary school, as much as we’d like it to be.”

Reedy adds, “For a new graduate considering a career in mixed practice, they should know that it is a very rewarding experience. You develop good surgical skills and critical thinking skills. This can springboard you into other areas of emphasis if you want to specialize or focus your career but are not sure yet which direction to take.” **TVP**

Amy L. Grice

Dr. Grice was an ambulatory equine practitioner in the Hudson Valley of New York for over 25 years, serving as the managing partner of the 13-doctor equine referral hospital in Rhinebeck, New York. At the end of 2014, she retired from clinical practice to concentrate on veterinary business consulting, and moved her residence to Virginia City, Montana. Dr. Grice received her BA degree in biology from Wellesley College in Massachusetts and completed her veterinary education at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Veterinary Medicine in 1990. She earned her MBA degree with a concentration in ethical leadership from Marist College School of Management in 2014. Dr. Grice is a member of the American Association of Equine Practitioners, where she served on the Board of Directors from 2015 to 2018, and as treasurer from 2021 to 2023. She also serves as a member of the AVMA Economic Strategy Committee from 2018 to present. Dr. Grice is a frequent speaker at educational seminars for veterinarians across the country, as well as the founder of Decade One, which leads networking groups for equine veterinarians early in their careers. In addition, she consults with a diverse range of veterinary businesses and collaborates with industry partners to bring business education to veterinarians. Dr. Grice aids with transitions of ownership, strategic planning, financial projections, and other solutions for private practitioners.



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