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The State of Veterinarians

Is there a crisis?

by Jami Gillig

The situation looks bleak. You know you need help. It's time to make the call. But, what if there is no one to call? You don't have a food-animal veterinarian.

This situation is becoming the reality in more rural areas across the country. Cattle producers have to rely on their own knowledge in emergency situations because a food-animal veterinarian is not available. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the alarming reality is that some rural areas of



the country are being hit hard.

As reported on the AVMA Web site, about 75 counties in the U.S. have more than 25,000 food animals and do not have a veterinarian. The largest concentration

of these counties is in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, with smaller pockets in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas and the Carolinas.

There are 217 counties with 5,000 to 25,000 food animals and no veterinarians. In addition,

AVMA also reports 152 counties with 5,000 or fewer food animals and no veterinarians.

"The Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC), the AVMA and other institutions have recognized for some time that there is a significant shortage of veterinarians nationwide, particularly those practicing food supply veterinary medicine, rural medicine, public health at local and state levels, diagnostic laboratory medicine and biomedical research," says Marguerite Pappaioanou, DVM, executive director of the AAVMC.

Further painting a sobering picture, a Kansas State University (K-State) study projects the shortage of food supply veterinarians to worsen by 4-5% annually for the next several years.

In addition, a report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ranked veterinary medicine ninth on the list of the 30 fastest-growing occupations for 2006 through 2016. It is estimated that jobs for veterinarians will increase by 35% in the next several years.

The writing is on the wall that this is a serious issue, especially when you consider that food-animal veterinarians play a critical role to ensure that Americans have a safe, healthy and secure food supply and are protected from disease outbreaks and pandemics. The question is how to turn the current situation around when there are so many factors that hinder an increase in the number of food-animal veterinarians.

The economics

The numbers can be staggering for any student considering veterinary school. On average, a veterinary college graduate leaves school with \$120,000 in debt. A graduate can also expect an average starting salary of \$61,000.

"We're trying to grapple with this serious issue," says Pappaioanou. "Due at least partially to past efforts by the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues, the profession has seen the income of veterinarians increase over recent years. Current statistics from AVMA have shown that several years out of school, veterinarians going into food animal medicine exclusively actually exceeds that of veterinarians going into companion-animal practice."

Pappaioanou says the reality is that education costs money and fewer sources of public funding are being invested in higher education, in general. Universities therefore have to supplement decreasing public state support with increases in private donations and tuition. To help alleviate some of the student-debt concerns, several states offer loan repayment programs for veterinarians who

practice in underserved areas. These states include Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont and Wyoming. The federal government has marked \$4.8 million since 2003 to go toward a new Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program, anticipated for implementation this year.

The increase in tuition and average debt load is making many colleges rethink their curricula. Given that student debt has become an issue for all students, no matter what their field of study, post graduate income has become a critical factor for being able to pay back acquired debt at graduation. Thus, it is essential that veterinary medical students learn sound business practices, no matter what career options they intend to pursue, as a part of their veterinary medical education.

"Most veterinary medical students, in their enthusiasm to learn as much medicine as possible, don't always appreciate the importance of learning sound business practices in order to maximize their post graduation income and aid in their ability to pay back their student loans when they get out of school," says Pappaioanou. "Colleges are now offering innovative courses in entrepreneurship and business practices."

Stagnant class sizes

The 28 veterinary medical colleges in the U.S. combined currently graduate from 2,500 to 2,600 students each year. This number has remained relatively stagnant the last few decades. This lack of growth in veterinary medical graduates is not due to a lack of applicants. According to the AAVMC, these 28 veterinary medical schools in the U.S. have facilities that are at full capacity, with qualified applicants outnumbering available seats three to one.

"For the past 30 years we have not seen a significant increase in veterinary school class sizes," says Pappaioanou. "This is due to shortage of state or federal investment in new facilities that would allow increased enrollments in class size."

Pappaioanou, along with Ron DeHaven, DVM, chief executive officer for the AVMA, testified before a senate subcommittee regarding the shortage of food-animal veterinarians and the need for funding.

"We are beyond the point of needing minor renovations to our schools of veterinary medicine," testified DeHaven. "Minor renovations would not allow our veterinary schools to increase class size to a level that is needed to meet the demand for

more veterinarians, both in the private and public sectors. We need major renovations, and we ask that Congress assist us in meeting this critical infrastructure need.”

DeHaven also noted that the space needed to educate veterinary students is unique. “This is not generic university space. It is unique teaching, diagnostic, laboratory and research space that must include special safety, restraint and animal-handling features that are not commonly found on American campuses,” testified DeHaven. This need puts an even bigger price tag on improvements.

Veterinarians with urban backgrounds

Long gone are the days when virtually every veterinarian was a food supply veterinarian. Today, only about 10% of veterinarians work to ensure a safe, affordable and abundant food supply.

“The biggest driver is a demographic change as more of our veterinarians and veterinary students come from an urban background,” says Gatz Riddell, DVM, American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) executive vice president. “We have fewer new graduates wanting to locate in rural areas where there may be more of a challenge to build income from a purely food animal practice.”

In addition, a growing disconnect from rural living and life on the farm is contributing to fewer students pursuing a career in food supply veterinary medicine.

“As our nation becomes more urban in nature, people are moving out of rural America and seeking to make a living in more populated areas, which is contributing to the shortage of food supply and federal veterinarians,” testifies DeHaven. “As farming operations become more consolidated, the links in the family farming chain — and the important exposure to the veterinarians who help these families care for their animals — are weakening, leading to fewer food supply veterinarians.”

It is true that a rural food-animal practice may not offer all of the perks of big city life. Hours can be longer, working conditions may be tougher and, as the number of veterinarians

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becomes fewer, travel may be required.

“For emergency care it is not unusual for rural veterinarians to travel 45 to 60 miles,” says Riddell. “Veterinarians will go farther for preventative care, especially if a full day’s work is required. Veterinarians that offer specialized services may travel an airline ticket away from their practice.”

Recruiting rural veterinarians

Recruiting rural food-animal veterinarians is a focal point for the AVMA and AAVMC, as well as several veterinary colleges.

“Through partnerships and professional relationships with several organizations such as the FFA, the National Association of Agricultural Educators and the National Science Teachers Association, the AVMA is reaching out to students to help attract bright, young minds to the veterinary profession,” testifies DeHaven. “We have created career videos and use social media to distribute information on veterinary careers and the rewards of working with food animals and on behalf of public health.”

In addition, a number of vet colleges are offering early admissions to students with an animal science background. “They are targeting those individuals with rural backgrounds and mentoring them to prepare them for veterinary school,” says Riddell. Additional support is given to the students during their first year of undergrad studies while they become

more acquainted with college life and develop positive study habits.

Once in veterinary school, students have the opportunity to learn more about different sectors of veterinary medicine.

“AABP is particularly pleased to be able to provide funding and support for externships available to student members,” says Riddell. “These externships target students with interest in food-animal practice, although they may not have had much exposure to bovine practice or the cattle industry. During those two weeks, the students get to go and see what a bovine practice is like.”

The future

There is no doubt that food-animal veterinarians are a necessity.

“They are not only promoting the health and well-being of our livestock herds and poultry flocks, veterinarians are also first responders on the front lines of disease prevention and response,” says DeHaven. “Their involvement in food safety plays a vital role in public health and national security.”

In some areas of the country the future of the large-animal veterinarian is bleak. Producers may need to find ways to educate themselves.

Producer programs

“In the past 15 years we’ve seen a shift where our food-animal veterinarians are expanding their role as on-farm educators,” says Riddell. “We’ve seen

success targeting both large and small operations with instructional programs that focus on preventative medicine and animal care.”

Producers should take the opportunity to attend educational programs, whether a veterinarian or industry partner hosts them.

Producers can get additional animal care training through online educational videos that were scheduled to be launched by K-State in mid-September. The new service includes more than 100 training modules targeting the care of beef, dairy and equine.

“Producers have the opportunity to purchase individual modules focusing on the health and well-being of cattle,” says Daniel Thomson, K-State veterinarian. “Some of the modules include castration, dehorning, calving difficulties, humane euthanasia and doctoring and treating sick calves. They purchase the module online and pay by credit card. A quiz is given with an e-mail certificate sent upon completion.”

The modules are offered in both English and Spanish. Producers can keep a virtual library of the modules and view them as often as they wish.

“We’ve tried to produce a quality product that is relevant and easy for producers to utilize,” says Thomson. “We want them to have a good return on their investment and ultimately increase the safety and well-being of their employees and cattle.” **HW**