

Addressing the Veterinary Shortage

Carla L. Huston, DVM, PhD, ACVPM

Beef Extension and Outreach Coordinator

Dept. of Pathobiology and Population Medicine

College of Veterinary Medicine, Mississippi State University

Submitted to: Cattle Business Magazine, July 2014

Every year about this time, following the graduation of another class of bright young new veterinarians from the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine, I am asked how many of them have gone into a large animal practice setting. And year after year my answer will stir up some lively discussion. One question I hear time and time again is, “Why won’t that nice young man/lady who used to help me work cows before he went into veterinary school come home to practice?” Unfortunately, there is no easy answer for either livestock producers or veterinarians. Given the good prices we are seeing at the markets recently, it’s hard for some to believe that there are not more young people interested in working with livestock. But just as we wouldn’t recommend a young person rushing out to buy cattle without a business plan, we wouldn’t want to encourage our new veterinarians to work in an area that couldn’t support them economically. Let’s look again at some of the issues facing our industries today.

Is there really a veterinary shortage?

Many veterinary colleges have actively recruited veterinary school applicants interested in food animal practice. The 2014-2015 freshman class of veterinary students at MSU CVM consists of over 30% of incoming students with a large animal or livestock background and interest. The challenge now is how to keep these young people interested in agriculture, while stimulating new interest in those who may not come from an agricultural background. I strongly disagree with those who tell me that a veterinarian cannot be a good large animal veterinarian if they didn’t come from a farm background. After all, as the saying goes, you don’t need to know how to drive a tractor in order to be a good cow vet. Nevertheless, I still frequently hear the stories from producers who have had a “hard time finding a veterinarian,” and I know many of you reading this article are shaking your heads in agreement.

The past several years, headlines in national news and agricultural publications have warned of the lack of food animal veterinarians and effects on the food supply. However, there seems to be some debate within the profession as well as the food industry on whether or not this veterinary shortage really exists. Are we truly lacking food animal veterinarians, or just veterinarians willing to work in rural areas? In 2012, the USDA identified close to 200 veterinary shortage areas across the US, with 5 of these areas located in Mississippi. These locations were nominated by state animal health officials in consultation with numerous industry organizations and represent areas that have a need for a veterinarian to do at least 30% food animal veterinary practice. In a state that graduates approximately 75 new veterinarians a year, it is hard to believe that there is truly a shortage of veterinarians interested in doing food animal practice.

Is the shortage of large animal veterinary services “real” or “perceived?” A recent 2013 Veterinary Workforce Study, sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), indicates that a maldistribution of veterinarians and veterinary services exists geographically and in employment sectors resulting in an excess capacity in some areas and

excess demand in others, such as rural communities. Some suggest that the demographical characteristics of new veterinarians point them toward larger urban practices, working for less hours or more flexible schedules. New graduates, not unlike graduates of any college program today, may find themselves wanting access to more social, entertainment, educational, and transportation options that are not as easily found in rural areas.

Do the economics of rural practice make sense?

Livestock production is a business; likewise, a veterinary practice is also a business that needs to be built upon solid business management practices in order to survive and grow with a community. I've been told just recently by a group of producers that they "only want a vet to pull calves when I need them. That's all." What kind of business model does that provide to a young person just starting out their career? I don't know of any plumber, electrician, doctor, or lawyer that could survive if only called upon during emergencies.

Veterinary students, on the average, graduate with over \$150,000 in educational debt alone. Partnered with an average starting salary of \$65,000 (which includes private practice, military, government and private jobs), the math tells a somber story. Even veterinarians who want to practice on food animals in a rural area may be forced to take jobs in higher paying areas in small animal markets. Similarly, despite the high prices we are receiving now, the overall economy has hit the agriculture industry hard over the years. The average age of livestock producers is increasing, input costs are growing, and animal agriculture businesses are consolidating. Producers are performing many procedures themselves without the assistance of a veterinarian, or even skipping such practices altogether such as pregnancy checking. They may not think they need a veterinarian full-time, but expect someone to be available for emergencies.

For both veterinarians and livestock producers, there is no easy solution to this problem. Dr. Gatz Riddell, executive vice president of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners, asks, "If you want somebody to come out and deliver a calf for \$35 like 'old Doc' did in 1965, how does that address the \$150,000 debt load?" He suggests that livestock owners in areas considered to have insufficient access to veterinary services are actually unwilling or unable to pay modern rates that would give veterinarians sustainable business and middle-class incomes. Take, for example, prescription medications. Some producers may choose to buy medications at a lower price on-line (*though costs are usually more with shipping*). However, they do not get the expertise and follow-up that is guaranteed with a valid veterinary-client-patient-relationship (VCPR) when that same medication is purchased through their veterinarian. There is no doubt that the cost of a veterinary education is expensive, and it's a price that we all need to consider when it comes to both receiving as well as providing veterinary services.

Several states have loan repayment programs to encourage veterinarians to consider rural or food animal practice. Mississippi has been a participant in the USDA's Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP), where new veterinarians can have a portion of their student loan paid off if they practice in a designated shortage area. In the past 4 years, this program has helped place 4 new veterinarians into rural MS communities. There are still an additional 4 shortage sites identified in Mississippi for 2014-2015 fiscal year. This program is only in its fifth year, yet we have already seen positive community impacts in those areas served.

What can we do to address the situation?

It is obvious that the shortage of large animal veterinary services in rural areas is not a clear cut issue that will be easily resolved. This is an issue that entire communities, not just the livestock producers and the veterinarians, have to work on together. The following are suggestions made by leading industry experts:

- Veterinarians can adapt their services to include areas such as genetic improvement, nutrition, business and risk management. It is no longer cost-effective for most producers to rely on a veterinarian give all their vaccinations and dewormings, and veterinarians need to change with the times in order to provide the most effective and efficient services to their clients. At the same time, producers must be willing to pay for these services.
- Producers can involve veterinarians in activities beyond a fire-engine response. Veterinarians have training not only in disease treatment but also disease prevention, public health, food safety, and food security. Prevention is far less costly than treatment. Rather than calling your vet to pull a calf several times a year, have him or her help you select a bull or replacement heifers for the next breeding season.
- Veterinarians can use their training and resources to help in youth development, public health, disaster response and community service. Participation in these activities can help build business and strengthen the veterinarian's role in the community.
- All of those involved in the livestock industry should seek training opportunities in business, economics and risk management. This will involve fostering relationships with community resources such as Extension agents, educators and other livestock producers and veterinarians.
- Producers and veterinarians can encourage prospective veterinarians or young veterinarians to fully understand what life in a rural community means. Give them a chance to succeed by providing mentorship.

Livestock producers and rural large animal veterinary practitioners need to work together to develop sustainable business models. After all, we need each other to survive. We have a common goal to address the care and welfare of our animals, yet we must also strive to increase cattle owner profits and support veterinary practice sustainability. Our livelihoods depend on it.