

Where have the veterinarians gone?

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Just a few short weeks ago, the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine graduated 76 bright young students, eager to start their new careers as veterinarians. The class came together with diverse interests and backgrounds, and will leave with a myriad of aspirations and opportunities. Many of these graduates will have also made one of the biggest decisions of their lives concerning their first job as a veterinarian. 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. Let’s look at some of the issues facing our industries today.

Is there really a veterinary shortage?

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. Many veterinary colleges have actively recruited veterinary school applicants interested in food animal practice. Some of the proposed new veterinary colleges are even targeting rural farm practice to their applicants. Nevertheless, I still frequently hear the stories from producers who have had a “hard time finding a veterinarian,” and I am sure many of you reading this article are shaking your heads in agreement.

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 lacking food animal veterinarians, or veterinarians willing to work in rural areas? In 2012, the USDA identified 198 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 2013, 4 areas in Mississippi are still designated as having a veterinary shortage. In a state that just graduated 76 new veterinarians, 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?

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, the 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 3 years, this program has helped place 3 new veterinarians into rural MS communities. This program is only in its fourth year, so the community impacts cannot yet be adequately assessed.

What can we do to address the situation?

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

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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 for the next breeding season.
- 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. You didn't have to be raised on a farm or know how to drive a tractor to be a good food animal veterinarian.

Livestock producers and rural large animal veterinary practitioners 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.

