How Will a Majority of Female Veterinarians Impact Practices?

Fifty-five percent of veterinarians were female in 2013, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). That percentage will continue to grow, because statistics also show that in the same year, 78.6% of veterinary students were female. How could this dominance potentially impact the veterinary profession in general and practices in particular?

• Retiring veterinarians may not be able to sell their practices because female veterinarians, who are often also busy mothers with families, may not be willing to take on the responsibility and financial investment of practice ownership.
• This could lead to small animal practice owners selling to veterinary corporations instead. While this may have several advantages (eg, streamlined procedures, bulk-buying power), it would be a departure from the mom-and-pop practices that have been the norm.
• More female veterinarians may want to work part-time or need flexible schedules for family reasons. This is not necessarily a bad thing—the flexibility and opportunities the profession provides (eg, child rearing, caring for aging parents, chronic health problems) are a career plus. However, such needs may prevent some female veterinarians from making the commitment necessary for successful practice ownership.
• Studies show that women charge less and earn less than men doing the same job; therefore, earning power may decline.

Women & Ownership
I have written previously about the importance of women “leaning in” to embrace leadership and small business ownership, and to reach for their goals. In her book Lean In, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg talks about the lack of women in world leadership positions and the psychological and societal differences among genders, which may have contributed to this trend. Such differences similarly affect female veterinary practice ownership, including:

• Fear of failure
• Fear of family distraction
• Financial restraint caused by student debt
• Lack of mentoring
• Lack of self-confidence.

As a small-business owner, I have struggled with these same concerns. I know how much sweat equity, stress, financial investment, and hard work are involved in getting a business or practice off the ground. I understand why ownership is not for everyone, male or female. It compromises your work–life balance. It can strain a marriage or partnership. It requires working evenings and weekends while your spouse or children are at home.

Taking the Lead
So, how do we keep this evolution from negatively impacting practice ownership? Here are some tips for future generations of women who want to be leaders in the profession or become small business owners.
**Step Up**
Follow Sandberg’s advice: Sit at the table and **lean in**—not out—when opportunities arise. Why? Women, especially early in their careers, are often reluctant to take on additional responsibilities (for the reasons listed above), but stepping forward creates opportunities for success. Professional success can lead to greater personal happiness, because your spouse or partner and your family can benefit from your success!

Young women who hesitate often come to regret that they did not take on a leadership role or business ownership, which can cause resentment and bitterness later on, particularly when they see colleagues advance and succeed as practice or business partners and owners. It is hard watching others enjoy a better lifestyle and financial situation, even though you chose not to take the ownership path and its potential for success.

Remember, ownership does have advantages. You can determine your own schedule and work part-time or flexible hours, set your own salary, and build equity in the practice.

**Start Early**
Have children early in your career, if possible. Take time off, work part-time, or use flex-time. Do not give up your dreams of practice ownership. Build a supportive network (eg, spouse, partner, parents, colleagues, nanny) and consult with friends and colleagues who do own practices for advice and encouragement.

**Offer Support**
Support colleagues who want to balance their personal and professional lives. Offer part-time work and flexible hours. Mentor younger veterinarians, because they are most likely to build or buy practices or small businesses. Encourage female practice ownership. As veterinary women learn to balance their professional and personal lives, they more likely will take the plunge into practice ownership.

**Advocate**
Women must not devalue themselves and fail to accept their worth. Instead, be your own biggest advocate and promote yourself, your profession, your career, and your success. Do not contribute to the stereotype that veterinary medicine is a “pink collar” profession.

**Conclusion**
Female veterinarians must champion their profession and its advantages. Then, I believe, they will be able to have families and own practices, and they will positively impact the veterinary profession.

**References**