THINK ABOUT THIS

The Changing World of Veterinary Medicine

In the early 1900s, veterinary medicine was a male-dominated, large animal profession. Today, we see a female-dominated, companion animal profession. What caused this dramatic shift?

One key factor was the urbanization of America and the transition of small farms into larger, more efficient, corporate-owned operations, which resulted in the consolidation of livestock and a reduced need for large animal practitioners. Another factor was the entry of women into the workforce during and after World War II.

The early days of veterinary practice required labor-intensive activity, such as manual restraint of livestock; therefore, the profession was rooted in a male workforce. Companion animals became more popular in the 1950s and 1960s as rural America moved into town and pets were invited from the barn to the bedroom. Pets soon became more popular as we recognized the human–animal bond and its value to people’s lives. The interest in veterinary medicine became more intense as more companion animal practices developed and the scientific knowledge base grew.

The number of veterinary schools began to grow in the 1970s as the federal government recognized and supported the profession. The number of veterinary students increased as new schools opened—and the male-to-female ratio began to change. In 2010, sociologist Anne Lincoln published “The Shifting Supply of Men and Women to Occupations: Feminization of Veterinary Education,” a study that measured the number of men and women applying for enrollment in professional programs.1 Male enrollment in U.S. veterinary colleges and schools decreased from 89% for the 1969–1970 academic year to 22.4% for 2008–2009.2 In 1987, the male-to-female enrollment ratio was 1:1. This was the last time men led or matched women in veterinary college and school enrollment.

What else drove this change? Lincoln’s study points to 3 potential factors: a 1972 federal amendment that outlawed discrimination against female students; prospective male applicants who decided against applying to professional schools because of the growing number of women enrolling; and the increasing number of women earning bachelor degrees, far exceeding men.1 Lincoln concluded that the only variable she found as an effect was the proportion of women already enrolled in veterinary colleges and schools: “Perhaps when a male student visits a veterinary school and sees a classroom with a lot of women, he changes his choice of professions.”1 When evaluating the enrollment of women in professional or graduate programs in scientific fields, veterinary medicine is near the top at 78%, followed by pharmacy school (64%), medical school (47%), and dental school (44%).2

Evolution of Veterinary Medicine as a Profession

In addition to income disparity and rising student debt, other changes affecting veterinary medicine include:

- A deeper focus on client relations
- An increased need for practice managers and veterinary technicians
- An increased use of technology in diagnostics and continuing education
- A renewed concern about work–life balance
- A softening interest in practice ownership
- More concern about pain management
- More new graduates entering specialization
- The increased development of corporate-owned practices
- The increased number of emergency practices.
Most medical schools in England have a larger percentage of female students (56%) than male. The Royal College of Physicians expects women to make up the majority of all physicians in Britain by 2017. The medical establishments in Britain and other countries are concerned about the future of medicine, provoking studies and sharp debates about this trend. Will the feminization lead to losses in income and status? Will countries need more physicians to make up for maternity leave, part-time schedules, and job sharing, which female physicians are more likely to seek as they try to balance their professional and personal lives?

Quality of Life vs Financial Rewards
Veterinary medicine today has more companion animal practices, higher student debt, more corporate practices, more specialists, more female associates and owners, and a consolidation of private practices, resulting in more veterinarians per practice. (See Evolution of Veterinary Medicine as a Profession.) Human medicine and veterinary medicine have moved from being a vocation (ie, a 24/7 commitment) to a “job,” as new graduates seek a reasonable income and a more balanced life. The typical veterinary team member does not want to be responsible for after-hours and weekend coverage.

As the profession has evolved to fewer work hours and less after-hours work, its members’ quality of life has improved but their financial rewards have leveled off. Emergency practices, now common in most large cities, allow fewer practice hours, but at the expense of revenue. This comes at a time when student debt is at an all-time high of $162,000, but starting salaries remain flat at $67,000. The student debt-to-salary ratio is now 2.3:1, which is more than twice the recommended ratio of 1:1. Some of the softening of starting salaries can be attributed to the economic recovery, but some is because women are paid less than men for the same job. Women, on average, earn 77 cents for every dollar that men earn.

Practice ownership results in a higher income for both men and women, but female owners still receive less than male owners. In private practice, personal gross revenue is generally lower for female team members and owners than their male counterparts, which is true across the United States in all employment fields.

References