The Importance of Integrating Community Practice Rotations Into the Veterinary Curriculum

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Abstract

Traditional teaching veterinary hospitals focus on specialty and referral care, which can leave many new graduates without a solid understanding of primary care. These referral hospitals self-select for clients with access to more resources, educating students on the "gold standard of care" rather than the "spectrum of care." Community veterinary practices offer an alternative, as they play a pivotal role in both veterinary education and community health. They often serve the underserved, providing accessible veterinary care to pets that might otherwise go without. The diversity of clientele and cases within a community veterinary hospital educates students on how to provide care to those with financial constraints and apply the principles of spectrum of care. These facilities offer veterinary students a diverse array of hands-on learning experiences, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By incorporating community veterinary practices into the education model for veterinary students, more students gain experience as practice-ready veterinarians.

Community veterinary practices are created with the mission of increasing access to veterinary care, particularly for underserved populations and financially constrained clients (King et al., 2021). They typically focus on providing care for companion animals, such as dogs, cats, and sometimes exotic pets (e.g., rodents, reptiles, and birds). These practices emphasize affordable or sliding-scale services to promote pet health across various socioeconomic levels. Many community veterinary clinics also operate mobile units that travel to low-income or rural areas, offering services in locations where traditional veterinary care may not be readily accessible (Provine, 2021).

Community veterinary practices often receive public funding, grants, or operate as nonprofit organizations, allowing them to offer reduced-cost services or flexible payment plans. Their financial models are not solely reliant on client fees but are supported by local government and charitable organizations, which enables them to reduce costs and expand access (Mattson, 2020). Community veterinary practices are typically non-profit, independently run clinics staffed with experienced on-site veterinarians and trained support staff. Some of these clinics provide rotations and externship opportunities for veterinary students, though these experiences are not always incorporated into the formal curriculum as required rotations. While the goal of these rotations includes empowering and educating emerging veterinary professionals, veterinarians provide oversight on every case, ensuring that students are not practicing outside their scope of practice. This article aims to highlight the importance of these partnerships and advocate that they be incorporated within core veterinary education programs.

Another important factor for veterinary students is that community veterinary hospitals exemplify the practice of the "spectrum of care" approach, where treatment options are adjusted to accommodate the diverse financial, cultural, and practical needs of clients and their pets. Rather than concentrating solely on the "gold standard" or highest level of care, this model enables veterinarians to tailor their recommendations to provide effective, appropriate, and affordable care based on each client's unique situation (Warman et al., 2023). This flexibility allows veterinarians to offer treatment options even when resources are limited, ensuring that some level of care remains accessible for most clients.

In contrast, private companion animal practices are generally owned by individuals or managed as part of larger corporate entities. Their focus is often on personalized care, with an emphasis on the gold standard of care and profitability rather than broad community health initiatives and accessibility. Private practices rely on client payments to cover operating costs and generate profit, typically following a fixed pricing model that reflects the quality and level of service

provided, with limited financial assistance options. While private practices do contribute to public health, their impact tends to be smaller, focusing primarily on individual clients and their pets.

Although private practices are essential to providing veterinary care, community veterinary clinics are able to provide broader public health benefits by serving pets in underserved areas, reducing zoonotic disease transmission, and improving overall community health. Their work also contributes to social well-being and mental health by ensuring that people from all backgrounds have access to veterinary care for their pets.

Limitations of Tertiary University Hospitals

The traditional model at most veterinary schools mandates that students complete the majority of their fourth-year clinical rotations at the affiliated tertiary university hospital (Warman et al., 2023). In most university clinics, students frequently assume a supportive or auxiliary role in the clinical setting. Within the context of specialists, residents, and interns, students typically find themselves in a background position concerning the care of the patient. Externships at private practices can vary widely in terms of case exposure and the quality of instruction (Fingland et al., 2021). Frequently, these externships lack a formal structure, and there is often no designated time allocated for teaching within the clinician's schedule. As a result, private practice clinicians may find themselves conflicted between providing instruction to veterinary externs and staying on schedule. In these more observational roles, students may not develop the critical-thinking skills necessary for navigating the challenges of client communication and real-time decision making.

Moreover, being exclusively exposed to those who can afford gold standard care may create unconscious bias against those who cannot afford it (King et al., 2021). These negative biases can perpetuate the idea that only those who can afford a pet should get a pet. Research has consistently shown that companion animals contribute positively to people's mental, physical, and social health across socioeconomic groups (Access to Veterinary Care Coalition [AVCC], 2018). Knowing this, providing access to veterinary medicine across socioeconomic lines is essential, and equipping students with the knowledge to provide it should be prioritized. According to the AVCC (2018), one in four households experienced barriers to care. In that study, 88% of people considered pets a part of the family, and 86.7% agreed that inadequate access to veterinary care could negatively impact the owner's mental and emotional health.

A student exposed solely to a single approach to medicine may come to believe that there is only one correct way to practice medicine. This perspective can hinder the future clinician's ability to think creatively and explore alternative solutions, potentially leaving many clients and pets without any form of care at all (Warman et al., 2023).

The Need for Practice-Ready Veterinarians

While specialty university teaching hospitals serve as centers of advanced knowledge and cutting-edge facilities, fewer veterinary students seem to be pursuing the internship and residency route towards specialization. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) 2024 report on the economic state of the profession revealed that the number of veterinary students pursuing traditional internships is in decline, with more new graduates entering into practice directly out of veterinary school. The distribution indicates that 24.6% of new veterinary graduates pursued an internship program, the lowest percentage in 20 years (AVMA, 2024).

As the demand for veterinarians has risen, some new graduates may choose to forgo internships due to higher starting salaries. However, these increased salaries may also create a heightened expectation for graduates to be more practice-ready. Furthermore, mentorship at their new practice may be constrained by myriad factors, including the number of veterinarians available at the clinic, the experience levels of the veterinarians and staff, the caseload of the clinic, and the time commitment required from both the mentor and mentee (Elce, 2021). Despite their increasing salaries, over 40% of veterinarians who graduated in the last ten years are contemplating leaving the profession (Ouedraogo et al., 2021). The AVMA identified mental health (31.2%) and lifestyle/work hours (17.1%) as the primary factors contributing to veterinarians leaving the field (AVMA, 2024).

All of these factors—reduced mentorship for new graduates, heightened demands placed upon them, and the prevalence of burnout in the veterinary field—underscore the necessity for veterinary schools to prioritize the graduation of more practice-ready veterinarians (Fingland et al., 2021). This indicates a need to increase students' exposure to a diverse array of cases, emphasizing

primary care and spectrum of care rather than focusing predominantly on specialty care.

Trending in the Right Direction

Many veterinary schools have already implemented community veterinary practices into their education model in a variety of ways. The Tufts University community veterinary clinic, Tufts at Tech, is run by fourth-year veterinary students to provide low-cost care to the community while simultaneously providing hands-on education for the Worcester Technical High School students enrolled in the veterinary assistant program (King et al., 2021). Kansas State University has mobile units that travel with students to underserved areas to provide medical and surgical services for animals in both the shelter setting and to underserved communities (Provine, 2021). Oregon State University has partnered with the Oregon Humane Society, providing on-site lodging for 1–2 week rotations for fourth-year veterinary students; students alternate between providing medical and spay/neuter services at the shelter and working directly with community-owned pets at the adjacent community veterinary hospital (Odegaard, 2023). Virginia Tech and Ohio State University built their own community veterinary clinics where students provide primary care services to pets in the adjacent communities (Myatt, 2020; Fingland et al., 2021). All of these programs have dedicated faculty veterinarians and trained support staff who oversee and mentor students.

In 2023, the AVMA announced 11 new proposed veterinary schools in the making (Larkin, 2023). More than a third of current veterinary institutions have had double-digit increases to their class sizes in the past five years. As we graduate more veterinarians, it is essential to recognize that the majority will be entering practice immediately after completing their education. To effectively complement the training received at referral university hospitals, community practice rotations should be seen as a vital component of students' comprehensive veterinary education.

Conclusion

There are many challenges facing the field of veterinary medicine, and there are many barriers facing clients trying to obtain care for their pets—which ultimately impacts the well-being of people as well. The heightened demand and salaries for new veterinarians can result in increased expectations and decreased mentorship, contributing to the existing burnout that prompts many veterinarians to leave the profession. Integrating exposure to community veterinary practices into veterinary education can enhance access to care for clients and their pets while also producing well-rounded students who are better prepared for practice. Community veterinary hospitals can serve as vital educational hubs and pillars of community health, benefiting both the next generation of veterinarians and the communities they serve.

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