

# Mr. Doyle Goes to Washington



*Matthew Doyle and Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)*

I sat in my aisle seat craning my neck to see out the window. Nothing but tiny buildings and patches of green beneath the clouds was all I could see. For a city with so many monuments and landmarks I had expected to recognize something as the plane was coming in for a landing, and then... BAM! There it was inches from the wing of the plane, the Washington Monument. I couldn't believe that I was that close to such an iconic symbol of our capital. I had expected a glimpse of the Capitol Building from a distance, but as I was to grow to appreciate, D.C. is an in-your-face type of city with nothing to hold back.

My name is Matthew Doyle and I am a third-year veterinary student from Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. I have many interests in different aspects of the veterinary profession; including public health, policy, international medicine, zoonotic diseases and wildlife issues. I saw this externship as an excellent opportunity to gain a sense of the governmental side of veterinary medicine and to meet with individuals in all of the different organizations that work with my interest areas. I planned on arriving and getting to work on some issues and meeting some veterinarians in the city, but I ended up getting much more out of the trip.

When I look back at the three weeks that I spent as an extern for the AVMA Governmental Relations Division, the most surprising aspect about working in Washington was the amount of influence that an individual person can have. I was impressed by the response that I received as a representative of the AVMA. People throughout the city were willing to take the time to listen to me and consider what I had to say. I was able to talk about issues that impact the veterinary profession and create dialogues with individuals from a myriad of different backgrounds and fields. Small groups or individuals really do have the power to impact our government and our way of thinking. Everywhere I went I saw how people were advocating, protesting, or educating others on the issues that were important to themselves.

This externship helped me to realize the importance behind educating the public and showing people how their lives are affected by veterinarians. If I were to take only one thing away from this experience, it would be that I can contact my government and educate them about what is important to me. They really do want to know and they will listen.

That being said, I think it would be quite near impossible to take only one thing away from the AVMA-GRD

externship program. So many opportunities arose during my short stay that I wish I had more time to explore them. Coming to Washington, D.C. as a veterinary student allowed me to meet congressmen and their staffers, lobby for important veterinary issues that may affect my own career, discuss careers with veterinarians across the city, explore different federal agencies and departments, find new opportunities to pursue, and take in everything that the District has to offer. I accomplished so much in such a short time, but when you are in the capital city of one of the most influential nations it is hard not to keep busy.

It was a great honor to meet Senators Debbie Stabenow (MI) and Wayne Allard (CO) in person, but I learned that the staffers who support them have some of the real power. I met with staffers from congressional offices from Idaho, Louisiana, New Jersey, Arkansas, and my home state of Michigan. It was interesting seeing how much pull they have in their offices over the different areas of policy.

Most of the individuals that I met were younger than I and just out of their undergraduate programs. They are the ones that are truly running the country from behind the scenes. Meeting and discussing issues with them was easy to do and they were genuinely interested in what the veterinary profession has to say. These are the people who inform the congressmen on how to vote for many of the issues brought before Congress.

I learned that if you want to support a bill, the best way to do so is to call your congressmen's offices and ask for the staffer who handles that specific area. You are a delegate and your opinions are important to the congressmen.

I was lobbying for the National Veterinary Medical Service Act (P.L. 108-161) and the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act

(S.746, H.R.1232) during my externship in D.C. The National Veterinary Medical Service Act was passed into law in 2003 and supports loan repayment for veterinarians working in underserved areas. It currently is seeking funding. The Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act is not yet a law. It would create a competitive grant program for institutions to use to develop and expand upon the infrastructure needed to produce more veterinarians in underserved areas.

To help support these two issues I called state veterinary associations, talked with staffers, and attended committee meetings on the Hill. I found support from some of these groups and tried to educate others. I know that externs have been working on these issues for a while before me, but I felt a sense of accomplishment and completion in seeing these issues go from the 109th Congress' old news to being reintroduced during my final days of the externship in this 110th Congress. Senator Allard introduced the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act moments after I met with him. I was then able to go back to the state groups that I had been contacting and get the grassroots support underway. I felt like I made a visible dent in the work towards getting funding and support for these two issues. Being able to get involved in the political process and tying it into my studies was a great way to expose myself to government and broader veterinary concerns.

Another large portion of my time was spent meeting with my future peers. There are veterinarians in almost every aspect of the government and they can be found throughout the District. USDA-APHIS-VS, USAID, AAVMC, AAAS, LOC, OSTP-EOP, FDA-CVM, NIH-OLAW, DHS, and NAFV are some examples of the alphabet soup of organizations with whom I met. Without actually breaking down all of the acronyms, it is important for one to realize that as a profession we affect government from all sides.

I found myself in awe at the scope of opportunities that this externship opened up for me just because of all of the individuals that see this program as a vital tool in introducing non-traditional veterinary careers to students. Schedules allowing, the veterinary community was happy and willing to talk with me and went out of their way to see that I enjoyed myself and that I had the opportunity to see what they do and how they got to where they are. I was given brochures, applications, contacts, and even a project for my MPH degree program. You cannot spend a week during this rotation without gaining some benefit that will last far into the future. In fact, I met a contact the very first evening in town at a Kansas State University sponsored dinner that is helping me set up another externship.

Meeting veterinarians whose careers have taken less traditional paths was very helpful for me. I was able to ask them how they made it to their jobs and why they came to Washington. I was able to compare different careers and get a better sense of the job opportunities that are out there. The veterinarians gave me advice about my own career, and surprisingly enough, most of them said the same things. A few had difference of opinion, but this allowed me to make better decisions. I feel more confident about my future and I feel that the AVMA-GRD externship program opened more doors for my career than I knew where available.

Getting beyond the politics, which is not easy to do in this city, and away from the meetings and issues, Washington, D.C. is a culturally rich and historical place to experience. Visiting for the first time, it can be an overwhelming place to see. Upon flying right past the Washington Monument and landing at Reagan National Airport, you are in a different world. Wherever one turns, there is a museum to explore or a memorial to contemplate. My favorite museum was the Smithsonian's Freer Museum. I spent much of my free time during the weekends running between fantastic

exhibitions and moving displays of history. I was also in town for the Chinese Lunar New Year celebration, full of dragons, food, and a five-story firecracker. There really is something here for anyone and everyone

However, the thing that amazed me the most about this city was the attitude expressed by the people on the streets. I have been to many large cities around the world, but Washington was by far the most polite and courteous. I was greeted kindly by sales people who helped when I was not sure in which direction I wanted to be headed. I also saw people who were quick to help out a woman that fell down on the escalator coming out of a Metro station. Coming here as an extern gave me the opportunity to see the Washington community in action and I was very impressed.

My advice for the future veterinary student externs is to come to Washington, D.C. with an open mind and be ready to have fun. Jump into the system. It is the best way to get over any precautions about meeting with government officials and veterinarians. Everyone is friendly and when they hear that you are working with the AVMA, they will welcome you to the city. Start out by contacting your state's congressmen. Be sure to schedule appointments with veterinarians in areas that you have interests in as well as some areas that you might not have previously considered until now. This is your chance to learn and expand your view of our profession. I would also recommend the fellowship program through the AVMA and the AAAS for practicing veterinarians who would like a chance at working with our government firsthand.

I would like to conclude by thanking Dr. Robert Nichols, Dr. Doug Meckes, John Sullivan, and the rest of the AVMA-GRD staff for their time and effort. This was a welcoming introduction to Washington, D.C. and an experience I would gladly recommend to any and all veterinary students.