

# AVMA-GRD's First 2007 Extern Goes "Behind-the-Scenes" of Politics

Arriving in our nation's capital for a four-week stay in the middle of winter might not be every veterinary student's idea of a career-defining rotation. However, I had waited since the beginning of my third year of veterinary school to participate in the externship offered by the AVMA Governmental Relations Division, and there was a long list of things I wanted to accomplish during my time in Washington DC. I was about to take a big step beyond my eighth-grade civics class and find out how the world of government *really* worked.

I hoped to be able to learn more about legislative veterinary issues beyond those reported on MSNBC. I knew that the shortage of food-animal veterinarians in the northeast corner of North Carolina would never be front-page news, until some type of outbreak occurred and there were no veterinary professionals within three counties of the affected farm. The veterinary community actually has a legislative tool that is designed to help alleviate this shortage of food animal veterinarians – the National Veterinary Medical Services Act. This Act was passed into law late in 2003, and it is designed to assist new graduates with educational loan repayment if they choose to practice food animal medicine in an underserved or rural area. However, this Act faces a challenge similar to many government programs – it is severely under funded.

I knew that the time had come for me to step out from behind the stack of clinical pathology textbooks and drug formularies and apply some real face-to-face communication skills about an issue that was important to my state and my profession. During my time as an extern, I planned to speak to as many of North Carolina's representatives and senators as would give me an appointment, and ring a few alarm bells on behalf of agriculture in our state.

Within a few days of arriving in Washington, I was granted appointments with two of North Carolina's Congressional Representatives, the Honorable David Price and the Honorable Brad Miller. I was also scheduled to meet with Chris Wall, the staffer from Senator Richard Burr's office who handles agricultural issues. Now came the real challenges – how to be friendly yet



Jananne Mathison and Rep. David Price (D-NC)

professional, how to use my limited appointment time wisely with a concise message and relevant details, and be able to answer questions knowledgeably.

I realized then that these were challenges I would face every day of my professional career and that these were skills that I needed to not just practice, but perfect. The other challenge I faced was finding my way to the appointed office at the specified time. That's when I learned my next life skill of this externship – navigating my way through the Metro.

I also spent a good deal of time doing "behind-the-scenes" work – no bill ever enters the House or Senate floor without the work and support of many different people. During the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, a bill called the Veterinary Workforce Expansion Act was introduced. This bill would have provided a competitive federal grants program for schools and colleges of veterinary medicine to expand their capabilities and infrastructure to meet the changing needs of the veterinary medical profession. Unfortunately, this version of the bill never made it out of its committee and onto the floor for a vote. Since this January marked the beginning of a new Congress, the bill must be reintroduced.

The veterinary community has a reputation for excellent grassroots support of relevant legislation, so it was time for me to see if that was the case with this piece of legislation. I spent many hours on the telephone with the executive directors of many state veterinary medical associations, asking them if they would be willing to write letters to their representatives and senators showing their support for this bill. Again, the same skills came into play – confidence

in my message, clear concise communication and the ability to answer questions knowledgeably.

Along with refining my career skills, I also hoped to gain some insight into my future career direction. I became fascinated with infectious disease epidemiology early on in my veterinary school experience, and from that interest I began to learn about career opportunities in related fields of public health, food safety, and emergency management. However, I now found myself four months away from graduation, and needing to narrow my focus on an immediate career plan while leaving myself enough flexibility to pursue different opportunities down the road.

I expected that my ultimate career destination would be some type of public practice, but I needed some good insight on whether I should pursue some type of clinical practice first. I also wanted to make very sure that my career plans would leave me the maximum latitude to pursue my varied interests, allow me to learn new skills, and utilize my own personal strengths. I talked with over 40 veterinarians working in and around the DC area, and their career experiences were extremely varied. I owe many, many thanks to all the veterinarians who took the time to speak with me, share their advice, and tell their stories about how they ended up in their positions.

I am also profoundly grateful to the hard-working team members of the AVMA Governmental Relations Division office. They truly opened my eyes to the career possibilities of working in organized veterinary medicine. Their dedication, talent, and determination to work for the betterment of our profession are an inspiration and a source of hope that our profession is indeed moving in the right direction.

Time will tell what the ultimate impact of this externship will be on my veterinary medical career. It has renewed my determination to build a career that will work for the betterment of the veterinary profession as well as human and animal public health. I have gained a new appreciation of how many opportunities veterinarians have to contribute to national and global health as well as a much clearer idea of the roles I can fill with my veterinary education and experience.