

THE FOOD SUPPLY VETERINARY MEDICINE COALITION

Attracting Students into Careers in Food Supply Veterinary Medicine Fact Sheet

“Attracting Students into Careers in Food Supply Veterinary Medicine” was published June 1, 2006, in *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. It investigated why veterinary students chose or did not choose a food supply specialty in veterinary medicine and what factors could influence future students to pursue food animal veterinary medicine.

Three surveys and four focus groups were conducted for this study. The following outlines the basic facts of the surveys and research conducted as part of this article.

Focus Group Methodology

The focus groups were conducted at two colleges of veterinary medicine — The College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University and the University of California – Davis. Each college had two focus groups:

- **Students** — one targeting 12 students in the first month of veterinary studies
- **Faculty** — one selecting 11 veterinary school faculty members in different specialty areas

Focus Group Findings

The focus groups identified nine factors as primary issues influencing the career focus of students who entered veterinary school.

- **Life Experiences.** What they did and what they were exposed to before and during high school had a profound influence on the direction of their career path.
- **Educational Debt and Salary.** Students were concerned with substantial debt load they faced when graduating, and many sought high-paying jobs to allow them to cope. Faculty indicated that student concerns about debt load increased as they went through school, and that seniors were most concerned.
- **Important and Interesting Work.** Several students cited the desire to have work that was of special interest to them or that they felt had special recognition as a reason for selecting certain career areas.
- **Family Considerations.** Students expressed concerns about wanting a job that allowed a spouse to also find fulfilling employment. There were concerns that large animal specialties would limit options. Faculty expressed concerns that the feminization of the veterinary profession has not been addressed well by the large animal job market.
- **Job Availability.** The perception of the number of jobs available in a particular segment of veterinary medicine had an impact on career choice. Students expressed concerns that aspects of large animal medical care that had been traditionally allocated to veterinarians were increasingly being handled by animal science graduates. Others felt there were opportunities in rural practice. Large corporate farms were viewed as an opportunity for more jobs.
- **Physical Demands of the Job.** Some faculty and students expressed concern about the ability to continue to perform large animal work as they grew older, or the possibility of getting hurt on the job. These concerns were expressed even by students who enjoyed working with large animals and considered themselves very capable at this stage of their life.

- **Lifestyle Issues.** The two primary concerns were geography — the location of the job — and amount of time on the job — the hours and days worked. Where students wanted to live (some wanted a rural community while others preferred a city) played a role. Most agreed they wanted more free time, and that more free time and less weekend work were key concerns. Faculty believed this was a generational change because the current generation of veterinarians is much more concerned about work hours and lifestyle than previous generations.
- **Animal Care Mentality.** Students who enter veterinary school with a strong interest in “fixing broken animals” are the least likely to want a career in large animal medicine. Faculty explained it as some students having a “herd” mentality, meaning a desire to treat the health of a group of animals, vs. individual patient mentality, meaning they see each animal.
- **Experiences in Veterinary School.** Faculty noted that the clinical teaching faculty had a tremendous opportunity to expose veterinary students to new areas of medicine. This exposure, if it is positive, could lead a student to a new career choice.

Survey Methodology

The online surveys sought to obtain data about veterinary students who chose food animal careers and the factors that caused them to make these choices. They also examined what students thought of a list of strategies designed to increase interest in careers in food supply medicine.

The three online surveys were approved by the FSVMC and AAVMC, and e-mailed to veterinary students in 32 veterinary schools or colleges in the United States and Canada. There were 718 first-year student respondents and 713 third- and fourth-year student respondents. Of the 713 third- and fourth-year students, 270 indicated a food animal focus. Finally, there was a survey of deans and faculty at veterinary medical schools, and 214 people responded.

The data were analyzed using a multivariate ANOVA with a between-groups design. This analysis revealed a significant ($P<0.001$) multivariate effect for the planned occupational area. Students indicating an interest in food supply medicine expressed the following perception factors:

- A career in food animal medicine is as intellectually challenging as companion animal medicine
- It is vital to me that my veterinary job be personally meaningful
- I want to practice the type of veterinary medicine that would let me live a rural lifestyle
- The thought of caring for herds or flocks of food animals is very appealing to me
- Food animal veterinary medicine would allow me to fully utilize my medical knowledge
- I value a strong mentorship training program in my first veterinary job
- I believe that livestock producers value the services of food animal veterinarians

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The other aspect of the survey was to determine how effective potential strategies would be in attracting veterinary students to a career in food supply medicine. The top-ranking strategies were overwhelmingly financial in nature. The following are the top six:

- Pay off all student loans in exchange for working in a food animal veterinary field for three years
- Offer paid eight-week summer externships in food animal medicine
- Financial assistance in purchasing equipment to begin a food animal practice
- Establishment of mentoring-shadowing program that matches high school students with food animal veterinarians
- Provide job placement services for food animal careers
- Assigning students interested in a food animal career to a faculty mentor

The top four reasons first-year students indicated an interest in a food supply veterinary medicine career were:

- Rural lifestyle
- Desire to contribute to public health or safety
- Career would provide a variety of interesting tasks
- Opportunity to work with nice, interesting people

Based on the surveys and focus group data, the authors provided a list of 13 action steps that the veterinary community could take to encourage interest in food supply medicine careers.