Wow. It’s great! 150 years of AVMA coming up this next year and, with it, a celebration of a century and a half of modern veterinary medicine in America. I’m excited to be leading our association in a time of such promise and such turmoil.

I’ve been thinking of Charles Dickens, one of my favorites, the author of Bleak House and so many other great novels.

Because if Dickens had been a veterinarian, he might have written “A Tale of Two Professions” instead of a book about the French Revolution.

He wrote:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness”

I think that pretty neatly sums up where we find ourselves today.

The best of times? It’s not what I’ve been hearing from my colleagues these days.

Students see a wall of debt facing them after graduation, and dimming employment opportunities as they compete with a larger cohort of graduates for jobs in the private and public sectors.

Colleges face declining state support – support that is already at an all-time low. Veterinary education is expensive and, in particular, teaching hospitals. Adding to the challenges, it’s difficult to motivate graduates to pursue advanced degrees and choose an academic career.

The sustainability of our current model of education is seriously in doubt.

Practitioners, 5 years into the Recession, still face a stagnant economy and an increasingly fractured world of service delivery.

If you treat companion animals, you know that the past decade has changed both the way we practice and the pricing model for our services. The great revenue drivers for us – professional expertise, procedures and pharmaceuticals – are all under great pressure in the marketplace.

Routine expertise isn’t worth what it used to be worth. We joked about Dr. Google in the past but I don’t joke anymore. From avma.org to WebMD to myriad individual practice websites, what clients get is reliable information for free, often good enough to allow them to make a choice on the need to consult a veterinarian.

The iconic procedures for dogs and cats are spays and neuters but, today, most rescue pets come pre-spayed. They come pre-immunized, too, and afterwards they won’t need vaccinations as often as in the past. Given the range of services offered at low-cost or donor-supported facilities, all routine services find downward pressure on pricing.

On the pharmaceutical side there’s Internet drug sale, the grey-market, product diversion, chain drug stores and HR 1406, the Unfairness to Veterinarians Act. The writing may well be on the wall but, for companion animal practice, pharmacy still represents a substantial revenue stream. When it goes, it’s unclear what, if anything, will take its place.

Everything isn’t cheerful on the equine side, either. As noted in the recent NRC study, investment in the racing industry, horse ownership and demand for veterinary services have all been declining.

New graduates entering equine practice face the lowest starting salaries among all private practitioners.
Animal agriculture has been changing as rapidly as any other sector of society. Consolidation among producers and increased efficiency has led to a declining demand for veterinary services, and has changed the roles of veterinarians in the livestock industry.

We’re challenged to provide veterinary services to rural America because, in part, many communities with needs don’t offer adequate career opportunities for one expensively educated veterinarian in a family, much less two.

Public practice is problematic in its own way. There are not enough jobs, or we don’t compete well for the jobs that do exist or we’re not specialized enough to qualify for the jobs that go unfilled.

So, we’re back to Dr. Dickens. Is this the worst of times?

For me, not by a long shot.

Veterinary education is more sophisticated and research driven than ever before. We are, these days, truly veterinary scientists. A contemporary graduate is just as well grounded in the molecular and genetic basis of disease as in the differential diagnoses of sneezing cats.

Educators look more critically at the skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed for successful clinical practice, and students receive more didactic and practical training in critical communication skills.

Clinical practitioners make more decisions based on evidence-based studies, as the art of practice yields to the science of practice.

Veterinarians have accepted the responsibility of looking out for animals for more than their utility, more than just their health and productivity. Veterinarians are more willing to champion the animals in our trust, at times to the discomfort of our clients and colleagues, sometimes even ourselves. Welfare is no longer a four-letter word in our profession.

Specialization has helped raise standards of practice, to the benefit of our patients and our clients. We can do so much more to treat disease, relieve suffering and extend life than we could a generation ago. We’re far and away better doctors.

On the food animal front, veterinarians are more likely to be valued consultants, as the fire engine practice of the past gives way to a higher-level role in modern production systems. Food safety and security in the US advances each year.

With our help, greater efficiency in animal agriculture means fewer animals feed more people at lower cost.

Veterinarians hold key positions in a wide range of public health and policy agencies, not enough, for sure, but from the Homeland Security to state health departments, from USDA to CDC, the recognition of the need for veterinary expertise is growing.

One Medicine has given way to One Health; and it no longer seems like us talking to ourselves, as the vision spreads beyond our profession.

Last month, Barbara Natterson-Horowitz and Kathryn Bowers published Zoobiquity, which focused on the benefits of bringing veterinarians and physicians to share a common understanding of health and disease – comparative medicine – which is a key part of the One Health message.

So, there are reasons for Great Expectations.

Veterinary medicine survived its first great dislocation in the last century when the horse stopped being the main source of transport. Many city-based veterinary colleges closed. Under the land grant colleges, we turned to agriculture and food production as our primary charge.
Today, we’re looking to biomedical research and public health to re-cast our mission for the future. These are important endeavors, for which we are uniquely qualified, and there’s no doubt that society will benefit from our increased participation in these spheres.

But offer no apologies for treating companion animals – given the importance of pets in developed countries this is not a trivial mission for our profession.

With a growing population, in a world where people are rapidly losing physical communities and replacing them with virtual ones, supporting the human-animal bond is a vital and noble undertaking. Our care for companion animals plays a very important role in enhancing the emotional, psychological and physical health of people.

Finally, of course, we come to AVMA.

I’m proud of how far we’ve come in the past few years, from the slow, conservative, resistant-to-change organization that I encountered when I first became an active member, to the far more dynamic and engaged AVMA of today. Regardless of the challenges, I believe that AVMA can help us face our times – the best and the worst – in a strategic, focused, even visionary way.

I’ve said before that AVMA is one of veterinary medicine’s best tools, but we can’t afford to be a multipurpose tool – doing everything, but nothing very well.

Without change, we can’t expect to see our next big birthday in such good health. Changing times call for an evolution in our association in order to meet the needs and demands of a new generation. The Task Force on Governance is our chance to remold AVMA into a better tool, for us and for the members of tomorrow’s association. We must take full advantage of the opportunity.

AVMA’s support for the UEP-HSUS legislation on poultry housing sent shock waves through the profession and right on up to Capitol Hill. With all due respect to those who opposed our stance, it was the right position for AVMA because it was the right one for the veterinary profession.

This kind of disagreement will happen again – we’re not a monolithic profession – and it’s critical that we mitigate the impact on our association so we can remain the united voice for veterinary medicine.

To help meet that objective and to promote unity and understanding, we are planning a summit this year to further an intra-professional dialogue on both pet and production animal welfare issues.

It’s important that we respect, and work to understand, the roles and responsibilities of veterinarians across the spectrum of professional activity. AVMA needs to remain broadly focused on the needs of all of our constituencies and be the voice for us all, while being ready to lead even when leadership is painful.

I’m pleased to see that AVMA finally has a senior staff member whose job description includes diversity. It’s been a long time coming, and it’s a fair start. We need to open up; we’re a not-very-diverse profession serving an increasingly diverse society. We can’t serve well people whose needs we misinterpret, whose culture we misunderstand or whose language we don’t speak. It’s about service and professionalism, and it’s also good business.

And business is one aspect of the profession that AVMA has added to its portfolio. This past year saw the advent of the Veterinary Economic Strategy Committee, and a commitment to a new Economics Division.

The first act of the committee was to initiate a workforce study to focus on the demand for veterinary services, and develop a model for future needs. By next spring, we should have high quality data to forecast, more accurately than ever before, the demand for veterinarians and veterinary services over the next decade.
In the absence of good data we’ve struggled to rationalize the increasing number of new graduates and rising educational debt. This year, we initiated a dialogue with the deans of the accredited schools to work together towards solutions to the problems we face. With a focus of the common good, we’ve established trust and found common ground in our concerns about the future of the profession.

In the end, of course, we can’t ignore our different perspectives, and no policy serves everybody’s interest.

AVMA controls no colleges, no farms, no hospitals, no animals. Our role is to look ahead, provide leadership and build consensus on what’s best for the profession.

Sometimes, it’s a rough road. Leaders sometime need to speak truths to people who don’t want, or can’t afford, to hear them. I hope to lead an AVMA that’s willing to make people uncomfortable for the long term good of veterinary medicine.

And so, at the start of my term and the end of this speech, my thoughts turn once again to Charles Dickens.

In A Tale of Two Cities, Sydney Carton, facing the guillotine in Paris, said this:

“It's a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done.”

I hope to make that true for me this coming year, and that I can make it true for you, too.

But I do hope to keep my head.