President-Elect Speech to the 2013 House of Delegates

President Aspros, members of the House of Delegates, Executive Board, AVMA members and guests, it is my honor to stand with you today as the incoming president of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

I thank you for this opportunity to serve you and the veterinary profession during this very unique year in which we are celebrating our 150th anniversary. I particularly want to thank Dr. Aspros for his dedicated leadership this past year. Doug, I look forward to working with you as immediate past president. We are indebted to you for your years of service. (applause).

Dr. Valarie Ragan, director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine Virginia-Maryland Regional College, whom some of you may know, recently gave a presentation to the Executive Board. It was an excellent presentation, but that is not where I am going. During her talk, she said that a speaker needs to know two things. First, they need to know their audience. Looking out at this assembly….that is a sobering thought. But, seriously, I do know this audience….you are veterinarians, we’ve grown-up in the same family, and I am privileged to be one of you. Valarie’s second point was that you need to answer the question of “Why would the audience care about what you have to say?”
This can be challenging; however, I get to talk about the AVMA. Your very presence here today gives testimony to your interest in AVMA! Last month on June 10th, AVMA reached the landmark of 150 years in existence. By most all standards this is a highly successful organization representing better than 80% of the veterinarians in the entire US. This substantially exceeds the membership benchmarks of almost any other professional association. We include veterinarians with a tremendous diversity of activities, interests, and perspectives. However, what about the 19% (almost 1 in 5) who are not members? Do we need to concern ourselves with them? At one time we had a higher percentage of membership. Historically, being as high as 86%. How do we capture those un-enlightened individuals who do not see the value of AVMA membership?

Let me digress: A client brings me a puppy. Let’s say it is a boxer, you just have to love boxer puppies. The puppy by all determination is healthy. This is wonderful! But now it is my responsibility to give this owner the distressing news! I do not state it exactly this way to my clients, but this is the point I make “I communicate that there are serious threats to the well-being of your puppy within this community and our clinic can help you to greatly mitigate those risks through a program of preventive care!” “Without this preventive care, your pets health might be put at serious jeopardy.” We call this preventive medicine and every veterinarian is taught to espouse this principle of protective care.

Likewise, when I graduated from the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine, I thought practice took care of itself. I would hang my shingle, open the doors,
clients would come in and everything would fit into place. I have since learned it is far from this simple. There is a perpetual barrage of regulatory, legislative, tax revenue generating, technological, and societal threats that impedes the veterinarians ability to practice medicine. This assembly does not need a litany of current threats, obstacles, and challenges to our profession. Our profession, like the susceptible puppy, is in constant peril and like the puppy, we as a profession need appropriate preventive care.

I contend that the AVMA serves, first and foremost, to provide this protection. The need to actively reach out to non-members and recent graduates through any and all venues reasonably accessible, and to educate them about the reality of the need for organized veterinary medicine remains a high priority. Intuitively, it should be an easy sell since we are communicating with individuals who should well understand the concepts of preventive medicine. I am asked, why would a veterinarian want to join AVMA? I respond, “Why would they not, the risk of not belonging is simply too high.”

So my first point. We cannot be complacent when it comes to member recruitment. Not on the individual or the associational level. We have to sell ourselves! The AVMA needs an ongoing commitment to sell its services to the veterinary community just like the veterinarian has the on-going commitment of selling his or her services to the animal owning public.
When I ask where does AVMA excel. A number of areas stand out. Undeniably our biggest asset is our voice. We indeed serve as the communications conduit of the profession. We are highly respected and viewed as a credible source of information.

Legislative advocacy is an important aspect of this voice where we continually interact with the political leaders on pertinent issues. Our Governance Relations Division and State Advocacy Department do a tremendous job of taking our voice to Washington and through the respective associations in to many state capitals. These events will only become more effective as we continue to interact and foster relationships with legislatures and their staff.

We are now engaged in a program to take our voice to the pet owning public. You have undoubtedly heard a lot about the new emphasis on preventive pet health care and the AVMA’s involvement in Partners for Healthy Pets. This initiative is designed to ensure that pets receive the proper preventive care they need and deserve. Our goal, as a founding member of the Partnership, is to provide members, free of charge, the tools needed to enhance animal health and advance the veterinary profession. I am confident that we will fulfill both goals. Make sure you participate in the Partnership, otherwise, your accountant and retirement planner will be asking you why you did not.

From my perspective, our second most valuable trait is our ability to collect and monitor data pertinent to trends and changes affecting veterinarians. We are constantly improving our data collection, compilation and interpretation capabilities.
We can be stronger in this area. Recently we have re-emphasized and invested greater time and resources in this arena. Our workforce study, the formation of an economics division and the hiring of Dr. Mike Dicks to head this Division are examples of recent steps taken to develop our analytical capabilities. Additionally, we are striving to become better at utilizing this data allowing for expedient direction of AVMA programs and initiatives.

The AVMA has been in existence for 150 years and from any studied perspective is needed more by this profession today than at any other time in our past. We currently have a convergence of events relating to education, compensation, competition, employment, technology, diversity and culture like no other focal point in our broad history. Yet the paradox! With everything the AVMA offers this complex and transforming field of service and science that we call veterinary, with cyber technology and instantaneous communication capabilities over great distances to expansive populations, why are we not reaching those who need us and those who in turn can amplify us.

The needs are huge, AVMA has the capabilities and, might I add, the capacity to make a difference. We have to once again, as we have numerous times in our past, deliver, by whatever means and whatever functions, the value of the AVMA to all the participants in our profession. A profession that offers a perspective and service that no other replicates. Then we can deliver our value to a society that has great need for us to provide veterinary
services for its animals. The ball is in our hands, no much greater, the globe is in our hands.

I could go on and on about how AVMA is an unparalleled organization and about the goals and aspirations I have for this committed group of veterinarians. However, my concluding sentiments are quite simple. Let us remember who we are as a profession, what we do as a profession and why we find it in our hearts to do the things we do. Members think they want various benefits form the AVMA, be that insurance, a convention or a journal. But, ultimately, what they need is a healthy, sustainable profession and that is the most important member benefit AVMA strives to provide.

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