Dr. Michael Topper Summer 2017 President-Elect Speech to the House of Delegates

It’s great to be with you today, here among friends in the AVMA House of Delegates.

Thank you for giving me the privilege of representing you as I assume the presidency of this outstanding association.

I would not be standing up here today if it wasn’t for the guidance and support from so many of you, my colleagues from both the House and the AVMA Board of Directors.

First, our outgoing president, Dr. Tom Meyer, who has been a wonderful mentor to me over the past year. Tom, I look forward to working with you as we build on the progress made under your leadership.

I also want to thank Drs. Ted Cohn and Joe Kinnarney. Their dedication to and leadership of this association was a model I will do my best to follow.

Another person whose quiet style of leadership frequently slips under the radar, but who has been a confidant and advisor to me for many years, is my outgoing District II director and our board chair, Dr. Mark Helfat.

I thank you all.

And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my lovely wife, Kimberly, for being my rock.

Kimberly is a Board member for the American Veterinary Medical Foundation and the Pennsylvania Veterinary Foundation.

She is a past-president of the Auxiliary to the AVMA and has served as executive director of the DCVMA.

She shares my love for veterinary medicine, and we have dedicated our careers to making this a better profession for our peers and for future generations of veterinary professionals.

Kimberly, I love you, and I thank you for your guidance and support these past 40 years.

It’s custom for a new president to stand before you and communicate their priorities for the coming year.

In keeping with tradition, I will have you know that I have a passion for leadership development, and building a stronger future through the cultivation of leaders will be a focus of my presidency.
As an ROTC student at the University of Georgia many years ago, my fellow cadets and I occasionally traveled to Fort Benning, Georgia, the home of the U.S. Army Infantry Center, for training.

It was there I first learned of a principle of Army leadership I still practice to this day.

That principle was: “lead, follow or get out of the way.”

To be a good leader, you must also know how to follow other leaders and assist them in completing their mission by working as a team.

Leaders must be adaptable to the needs of the organization in order to succeed.

One thing I learned in my 22 years as an officer in the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps is that a successful leader “takes care of their troops.”

This conviction has guided me throughout my career in both the paid and volunteer workforce, and it is why I embrace the principles of servant leadership.

The key priorities of servant leadership are: developing people, building a trusting team, achieving results;

Its key principles are: serve first, persuasion, and empowerment;

And its key practices – listening, delegating, and connecting followers to the mission – have worked very well for me, and I believe will work at all levels of organized veterinary medicine as we strive to protect, promote and advance our profession.

The AVMA can do more in promoting leadership development, in general, but specifically in helping veterinary practice owners develop team-building and team-leadership skills.

These skills will serve them well in all aspects of their careers, and will not only make them a better leader of their practice team, but also make them a leader in their community.

By better utilizing the annual Veterinary Leadership Conference, our Future Leaders Program and our Early Career Development Committee;

By expanding our partnership with the Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative and other leadership programs;

And by improving existing seminars, workshops and online leadership training, we can better meet this need for our members, and for our principal and constituent allied veterinary organizations.
And so, let’s work together and make the AVMA the center of excellence for veterinary leadership development for our next generation of leaders.

A second important issue that we as an association must continue to help address is shortages within the federal veterinary workforce.

There is an ongoing concern that federal agencies lack sufficient numbers of veterinarians necessary to mount an effective response to a highly contagious or economically devastating animal disease.

We can do our part by advocating for the creation of new jobs and increased responsibilities in all public practice areas.

We also have two resolutions before this body that call for assistance in supporting the federal veterinary workforce.

It’s critical that our federal agencies improve their assessment of future veterinary workforce needs and ensure that critical positions related to public and animal health and safety get the attention they need and are filled by those who can best do the job.

The AVMA also must continue to lead and become even more immersed in the One Health movement.

Our Global Food Security Summit and our joint statement with the American Academy of Pediatrics released last November in conjunction with One Health Day are just two recent examples of the great work we have done in this important area.

Ultimately, people and animals rely on the environment for their nourishment and survival, and it’s these interconnections that make the practice of One Health so critically important for each of us.

As veterinary professionals, we must uphold our duty to promote the health of all species and the varied places in which they live.

Another issue not exclusive to the U.S. veterinary profession is wellness.

From the launch of QPR training earlier this year to our new LinkedIn Community on Wellness and Well-being and our new cyberbullying resources, our wellness initiatives and our drive to help lead the way toward improved well-being are providing new support and services to our colleagues in need.

And ... we continue to learn from and work with our veterinary colleagues from the U.K. and Australia on improving veterinary wellness across the globe.
As president, I look forward to working with the AVMA family and our coalition partners as we develop new initiatives to address this critical issue.

And, let me also say that, when it comes to veterinary economics, the AVMA is second to none.

We pride ourselves in not only generating the most comprehensive, up-to-date and reliable economic data ever seen in the profession, but also in offering a wide range of tools to help with improving practice profitability.

By continuing to work jointly with our partners in understanding the complex economics of the profession and addressing student debt, we can help ensure that every veterinarian finds the profession to be personally and financially rewarding.

A joke I frequently hear about pathologists is: “they know everything about a medical problem, but it is too late.”

I’m a pathologist, and trust me, I do not know everything. You can confirm that with my former colleagues and Kimberly.

But, one thing I do know, and it is not too late to do something about it, and that’s “owning our profession.”

Dr. Meyer started talking about this last year. As your new president, I will keep talking about it.

If we veterinarians do not “own” the professional issues dealing with the diverse practice of veterinary medicine, somebody else will.

We must “own” advocacy at the state and national levels to prevent legislators from telling us how to treat animals.

We must “own” production animal welfare to prevent consumers and retailers from telling us the best way to humanely raise these animals.

We must “own” being the public face of veterinary medicine to prevent others from being the “go-to source” for information.

There are many other examples.

Owning it may force us out of our comfort zone because it will mean being proactive and not reactive, and being willing to take on challenges that are best for the profession.

But I believe we have it in us.

I want to close with a quote from former President George H. W. Bush.
He said, “No definition of a successful life can do anything but include serving others.”

I thank you for your service to others, and in particular, your service to the AVMA and our members.

I look forward to continuing my service to the AVMA and the veterinary profession, and to working with you in the year ahead.

Thank you.