President Corry, members of the House of Delegates, Executive Board and guests, it is with great humility that I come before you today as the next President of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

This is truly an honor, and I pledge to you that as I serve the AVMA, our members and the veterinary profession over the coming year, I will do so with dedication and pride.

I am blessed to have a number of family and friends here to share this moment with me and would like, in particular, to recognize my wife, Chris, and our four children: Steven, his wife Amy and their wonderful children Sam, Rett and Hank; Kyle and his wife Megan; and our two beautiful daughters, Kendra and Koral.

I would also like to say a special thank you to my brother, Joe, his family, and my very special friends, Del Woods, Marshall Odom and Bobby Gros.

Their love, friendship and support has meant so much and continues to be instrumental in allowing me to pursue one of my passions – the continued enhancement and advancement of the veterinary medical profession.

As veterinarians, we have pledged to use our scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

I respect this oath ... just as I respect each and every veterinarian who upholds its ideals through dedicated service to our profession each and every day.

I believe this respect is mutual. And this mutual respect is the very foundation upon which our profession and this Association has been built.

From our humble beginnings as an Association in 1863, our membership is now more than 80,000 strong. And as we approach our 150th anniversary, I am very proud to say that our unity has grown to the point where AVMA membership now constitutes roughly 83 percent of the veterinarians in the United States.

But I also sense potential fractures in our unity.

Yes, we are strong, probably stronger than we have ever been in terms of our influence, our authority as scientists and the respect we enjoy. However as new challenges and opportunities arise, we have never needed each other more than
we do today. We cannot take our influence, our authority and our respect for
granted.

My concern is that while we may have never been stronger … we also have
potentially never been so divided.

Whether the issues are related to animal welfare, the use of antibiotics in food
animals or the accreditation of foreign veterinary schools, I sense a certain level
of disunity among us. And disunity can have far-reaching, negative impacts on
our profession as a whole – from the halls of Congress to the very clients we
serve.

I also believe very strongly that we can fill this divide – and that the respect we
have for one another is going to help us do just that.

Because, you see, unity is not a complicated issue. Either we stand together, or
we do not. Either we embrace everyone’s opinion, or we do not.

One of Aesop’s Fables, I believe, captures this theme perfectly. It is called the
lion and the three bulls, and it goes something like this:

For a long time, three bulls pastured together. A lion lay in ambush in the hope
of making the bulls his prey, but the lion was afraid to attack while they kept
together. At last by divisive speeches and trickery the lion succeeded in
separating the bulls, he attacked each of them without fear as they fed alone . . .
and feasted on them one by one at his leisure. Union, is strength.

Now, I am not naïve enough to believe that we will all agree on everything all of
the time. One of the beautiful aspects of veterinary medicine is the colorful prism
of personalities, ideas, philosophies and backgrounds that constitute our
profession. But I dare say that we must all strive to pull on the same end of the
rope if we are going to stay relevant and continue to make progress in an ever-
changing world.

If I may, let me share with you my experience on the AVMA Executive Board and
how, as board members, we adhere to a sense of unity and respect. Regardless
of the honest debate underlying each vote we take, we emerge with a unified
message, because we understand we are here to represent the profession, not
our own personal and individual interests. That is our pledge to each other. That
is our pledge to you. And it serves as a strong message of unity.

So while we will not always agree on specific issues, we can, for the betterment
of the whole, agree that we need to continue with a united overall message. If
we splinter off into many different groups – and allow occasional disagreements
to influence the whole thought process – we will lose our effectiveness.
As veterinarians, we share a common bond, and I will work this coming year to strengthen this bond by welcoming everyone’s input, by opening my mind to varied perspectives, by offering guidance when I can and by helping build unity to mend those fractures.

But we also need your help. We need you to get involved in policy discussions and to share your opinions before the fact, not after. Let us know your feelings during the process, not once the decision has been made. Contact me or contact your Executive Board representative. Let us know what we – and the AVMA – can do for you.

I often hear that we as Board members – and indeed the AVMA as an Association – do not seek member input often enough. Suffice it to say, while one can always do better, the AVMA strives to communicate with its members at many levels.

Many of you may be unaware that you can share your thoughts and opinions with us through a number of channels. You can let us know what you think through NOAH, our online discussion group. Our AVMA@Work blog allows you to comment on topics ranging from animal health to workforce issues. And we often reach out to you directly in the form of member surveys. These are just a few of the examples of how we are constantly seeking your opinion. The problem is we do not hear from you often enough, and we need your input.

If you have not been involved in the discussion yet, a great place to start is by attending “AVMA Live!” tomorrow and Monday afternoon to share your thoughts on any topic with AVMA leadership and senior staff members. It will be a golden opportunity for you to take the microphone and let us know what you are thinking.

A huge part of unity is inclusiveness, and opening more doors to welcome under-represented groups into veterinary medicine will be another focal point of my year as AVMA President.

Take a moment to look around. What you see is that we are no longer a profession dominated by Caucasian males. As a matter of fact, our membership is now more than 50 percent female. See all those young faces? If you take the time to get to know some of them, you might also gain a better perspective of our society’s cultural changes.

It is my goal to foster the process of inclusivity we have already started, one that has gained significant steam over the past few years. Because as we all know, America’s neighborhoods are changing when it comes to race, ethnicity and cultural differences.

I see that change where I live and where I work.
Just a few years ago, most of our clients looked like me and my wife, Chris. They spoke like us. And they grew up where we grew up. Today, our clients have changed, and because of this change, we have diversified our staff, we have hired bilingual employees, and we have taken other steps to better serve our wonderfully diverse clientele.

As a result, we are more fulfilled in our practice and more successful in business than we have ever been.

Our practice embraced diversity, and the AVMA is embracing it, as well. Evidence already exists right here at the convention. The “We are AVMA” diversity symposium, to be held Monday morning, is an example of our commitment to spreading the message and taking action regarding diversity and inclusion. We strongly urge all of you to attend the program. You will be enlightened, and you will walk away empowered, knowing that you are part of this important movement.

Programs like the diversity symposium, along with many other efforts currently underway, will help us connect with more potential veterinary students who are representative of the changing demographics of our nation. In turn, this will enhance the professional services we provide to a broader segment of society. And such endeavors will strengthen our public image and help us deliver valuable dividends to our clients, patients and members.

We are also looking inward in our drive toward unity. The AVMA is making great strides toward becoming more unified with the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, the charitable arm of AVMA. A closer affiliation between these two groups will undoubtedly make each of us better as individuals and stronger as organizations.

We are also working with members of the AVMA Auxiliary as they continue to focus on their goals and objectives in an effort to meet the needs of their current and future members.

Diversity also means that everyone is involved. I will work tirelessly over the next year to welcome everyone to the table. While I am so proud of what we have already accomplished, particularly when it comes to the great work our staff is doing to enhance diversity in the profession, you and I both know we can do more.

Greater unity, diversity and inclusion will also help us reap other rewards. As we add more voices to the choir, our message will be stronger, reaching the ears of those who have a profound impact on our profession. I am talking about legislators on both the state and national level, the people who make the decisions that affect where you practice and how you practice. Indeed, elected
officials everywhere, including those far removed from where you work and live, actually define the practice of veterinary medicine.

I urge you today to join me in a pledge to dedicate as much time as you can to becoming an advocate for veterinary medicine. It is not difficult, and the exceptional staff members in AVMA’s Governmental Relations Division will help.

I ask that you take an active role in learning more about the AVMA Political Action Committee, our AVMA PAC, which allows us to provide financial support to select candidates who are seeking election or re-election to the United States Congress.

Now I know that the thought of money and its impact on politics can make some stomachs turn. But let me take a moment to dispel the myth that this type of advocacy is all about buying votes. It is not about buying votes. It is about investing in those who have already invested time and effort in us. And with election cycles the way they are today, our PAC activities are crucial if we hope to maintain some continuity among the supporters we have come to count on in Congress for their support of what is important to veterinary medicine.

If you are not comfortable contributing financially, you can sign up to become an active member of the AVMA Congressional Advocacy Network – also known as the AVMA CAN – and help us advocate for veterinary medicine and for important issues that impact our daily lives.

You can also get involved on the local level by volunteering for a campaign or supporting legislation that you believe represents the best interests of veterinarians in your state and across the nation.

No matter which avenue you choose, getting involved will help us plant, nurture and grow our grass roots efforts and build our base of influence – both at home and across the nation.

In closing, I would like to share with you a quote from Mark Parker, President and CEO of Nike. He summed up my thoughts in one sentence when he said, “The best innovation comes from inclusive environments that foster diverse ideas, nurture people with diverse talent and backgrounds, and create strong relationships with diverse communities.”

We can apply Mr. Parker’s words to the evolving world of veterinary medicine. Once again let us all work together to help make our noble profession even better – today, tomorrow and for years to come.

Thank you