2020 AVMA PRESIDENT-ELECT SPEECH

As I reflected on the past year and prepared for the next step in the journey, I went back to the service of Dr. John Howe and Dr. John de Jong. Dr. de Jong will be stepping down as Immediate Past President and serving for many years in leadership for the AVMA. When he assumed the Presidency, his mission was to promote veterinary medicine to the public, and he has done so tirelessly. John shined a bright light on our profession for all the public to see. He has done an admirable job with his mission, and I am sure he will continue to advocate for us all.

Next up is Dr. John Howe, with his mission to make the members the driving force of the AVMA decisions. As another focus, he called on his years of experience in private practice from equine medicine, companion animal to aquaculture, to stress and advocate the importance of veterinary technicians as a crucial part of the veterinary team. Good teams make business more efficient and profitable. Thankfully John will be with us another year, as there is more work to be done. I am thankful for the mentoring both have given me this year, but now it is time for my next steps on this path.

As you may recall, my platform was about building and connecting with our members and potential members. I used Legos as a metaphor for our profession. They are versatile, integrate well with Legos of different shapes, colors, and sizes. Together, they can build great things. My mission is to listen, serve, and connect with the members; To build within our profession; Bring together shared interests; To be more inclusive. We are stronger together and will do great things for our communities and veterinary medicine.

We are a versatile profession; We have expertise in animal health and welfare, food safety, research, environmental protection, and public health, among others. We work all over the world, in all types of fields, helping to ensure the health of animals and people. We all fall under the umbrella of our AVMA. We are many great things, yet we still have our flaws. We continue to support our members by working on personal mental health and wellbeing, student and early career debt load, and diversity and inclusion. Yet we need to still advocate for and advance our profession by advancing the science and practice of veterinary medicine to improve animal and human health.

Since our last meeting in January, many things have happened. At times it feels like an AllState commercial with the Mayhem Guy. Wildfires in Australia, impeachment trial, COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, social injustice, financial market volatility, and animal rights activist, to name a few. These are all challenges that we have faced in the past seven months. Some were background noise, some were entirely out of our control, and some we rolled up our sleeves and managed the issues.

With the many challenges and opportunities facing our nation and the veterinary community, it is clear that civil unrest and calls for justice deserve our time and attention. I am making and will continue to make an intentional effort to listen more, learn more, and do more. As part of the AVMA Future Leaders Program, our project was cultural competence, which is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. While researching for our project, I read a study from the American Medical Association about how people have a preference to seek care from those they relate to and look like them. The reality that Black, Indigenous, and people of color are often treated very differently by institutions as well as by individuals is a new realization for many us, but not those who feel marginalized.
There are people in our midst that have experienced this personally. We must address these issues as individuals, as businesses, and as organizations. I’m aware that some wonder what diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice have to do with veterinary medicine. It can be as simple as it is the right thing to do for social good. 99.9% of our DNA is the same. We are equals. For those that want more of a what is in it for me, answer. It is as simple as it makes good business sense, as it helps meet the needs of a growing population of people who will become our potential clients.

As a white male from a conservative area of the Midwest, I know I need to make an intentional effort to learn more about why diversity is part of a healthy, thriving profession and how to put those principles into action. Increased diversity improves access to healthcare in the United States in regions where severe ethnic and racial disparities exist.

Studies show, researchers with more diverse backgrounds and experiences shape their critical thinking at a higher level, which leads to accelerated advances in public health and medical research. All of this sounds like it is good for business and our profession. Change takes time, and it will be uncomfortable; it is for me. If we plant a tree today, it offers shade and bears fruit for the next generations. Go to AVMA AXON and check out the resources the AVMA has available as a first step. At a minimum, recognize that this work is uncomfortable and challenging, and then commit to doing it anyway. Commit to learning about being an ally; our biggest mistake will be to take no action at all. It will look and feel different for each of us.

I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude for being a member of the AVMA. I am very proud to be part of an organization that shifted into overdrive to support its members during the COVID outbreak. In Washington, the AVMA was a leading voice for the Payment Protection Program and the adjustments that have come since its inception, as well as student loan relief, advocating for the Farm Bill, among other appropriations. Veterinary medical professionals have proven to be essential for the health and wellbeing of the patients and clients we serve. The list of all the AVMA does for us in advocacy is endless. Think about the support the AVMA gave directly to our members with all the regular and timely updates about COVID-19, resources developed about protecting your team and case management, as well as preparing us for all the media requests. The information to help us navigate these uncharted waters was incredible. The AVMA is here, not just in times of crisis but 365 days a year. I cannot begin to scratch the surface on the number of resources available.

I keep hearing about the new normal. What will veterinary medicine look like, and when will it come? I don’t have those answers. What I do know is that we are veterinarians: We evaluate options; We adapt: We even invent new ways of doing things. Normal is OK and comfortable, but at some point, we want to grow and be challenged. May we find others along the journey who encourage us to be the best version of ourselves—and may the bumpy road of personal and professional growth provide us opportunities to become stronger and more resilient.

After all, we are veterinarians; we meet challenges head-on; it is what we do. This is our passion. This is our profession. This is our AVMA.