

November 26, 2016

Dear Veterinary Practice Owners of Ontario,

I would like to introduce myself. I am Jeff Wichtel, Dean of the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph. One year into my position, I remain inspired and humbled by my new role in supporting and furthering our profession.

Since my own graduation, I have worked as a mixed-animal practitioner, a teacher, a mentor and a researcher, in many parts of Canada and the world, but I have never practiced here in Ontario. I came to OVC following 18 years at the Atlantic Veterinary College at UPEI in Charlottetown. Over the course of my first year, I have spent time carefully listening to every student and veterinarian I encounter. I have talked to many alumni and practice owners like you, and I have visited some stellar practices. I have also had a lot of interaction with veterinarians serving in the various professional organizations, and have become quite familiar with the issues that concern the profession here in this province, nationally, and internationally.

The feedback I have received indicates there is a very wide range of views on how our profession is doing in Ontario. Many feel it is quite strong, while others feel it is in terrible trouble. It will probably not surprise you that I choose to take an optimistic view – not just because I am a new Dean and I see the future opportunities for our students, but because I see much evidence that the profession is adapting well, as it has always done during periods of change, to the new and changing realities of today's business environment.

There is no doubt this is a period of change: slow economic recovery, changing demographics, competition for the client dollar, tightening margins, corporatization, fragmentation and stratification of the marketplace, increased criticism from the public, impending changes in stewardship of antimicrobials, student debt and reduced provincial support of education ... all of this equates to real challenges for the veterinary profession. It is understandable if we can feel a little overwhelmed now and then.

So what has motivated me to write to you at this time? Some practice owners have approached me to tell me that the typical graduate of OVC no longer meets the needs of their practice with respect to their approach to work, and perhaps OVC admissions policies and/or academic programming might be part of the problem. These are comments that I take seriously, and our efforts to explore this issue will be the topic of this letter.

As a college of veterinary medicine, we constantly look to the future to ensure that we are doing everything we can today to predict and prepare for the inevitable changes in our profession. The level of self-reflection and analysis we do at OVC would, I think, surprise you. As one example, we survey our graduates and their employers every year, at one and five years out, looking for ways in which we can better prepare our graduates for the workforce. The statistics we collect suggest a high demand for our graduates (100% of respondents employed one year out), and a high degree of satisfaction with our graduates.



Figure 1 Graduate (top) and employer (bottom) assessment OVC 2015 graduate of overall job performance

The OVC has adopted a culture of continual improvement. We are in a constant state of review, as we seek to enhance our facilities, services to referring veterinarians, DVM curriculum, recruitment and admissions processes. It is the dedication of our faculty, staff alumni and students that drive us to be the best we can be. We continuously seek out and employ best practices from here in Canada, and other countries to improve the learning experience and deliver practice-ready veterinarians. The student experience of today bears little resemblance to that of 10 years ago, let alone when many of us graduated.

Changes that have resulted either directly or indirectly from the feedback we have received from employers and graduates include the following:

- A move to allow tracking (focus) towards companion, food equine or mixed animal practice;
- Enhancing technical and surgical skills through experiential learning exercises within all years of the DVM program;
- Establishing a world-class primary care companion animal hospital to familiarize our students with the demands of modern practice;
- Integrating pet wellness programs and nutritional consultations into our training;
- Incorporating business and communication skills throughout the program;
- Developing student wellness and self-management initiatives.

The most relevant and impactful change for companion animal practice owners seeking to employ new grads is the integration of our Hill's Primary Healthcare Centre (Hill's PHC) / Smith Lane Animal Hospital (SLAH) into all four years of the DVM program.

For those of you not familiar with it, the Hill's PHC-SLAH is a stand-alone two-veterinarian practice that operates independently from OVC's referral hospital. It has its own clientele from the Guelph community, and teaches the core competencies of general practice to our students. Experiential learning objectives focus on client communications, wellness, nutrition, and business. If you have hired an OVC grad in the past 5 years, I think you will have noticed a big change in their practical skills as a result of their time in the PHC.

In addition, OVC has dramatically changed processes around admission. While grades are still important, the Multiple Mini Interview (MMI) model, used by many medical schools and quite a few veterinary schools, has been adopted in recent years. Through a series of one-on-one interviews with a mix faculty, staff, students and alumni volunteers, the MMI gives applicants the opportunity to demonstrate situational management (i.e. a non-cognitive assessment of skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, empathy, interpersonal skills and verbal and non-verbal communication, and self-management). These characteristics were deemed to be the most important based on responses from over 1300 Ontario veterinarians in a 2009 survey. This new interview process allows the admission committee to assess an applicant's ability to be successful within a career in veterinary medicine.

All this is not to say that we at the College do not recognize problems in our profession: we are very concerned at the growing trend in anxiety, burn out, depression and suicide, a trend which is being observed in our province, and in health professions in all jurisdictions with which we share statistics. And we are doing something about it.

Last summer the Advancement of Wellness and Resilience in Research and Education (AWAR²E) research group at OVC completed a survey, supported by Zoetis, of 400 veterinarians in Ontario, the first of its kind. Most respondents, 91%, were clinical practitioners. Two-thirds of participants met the scale definition for some level of anxiety

and one-quarter met the scale definition for some level of depression. The researchers also noted an unusually high prevalence of burnout (low personal accomplishment, high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization) and compassion fatigue (low compassion satisfaction, high burnout, and secondary traumatic stress). They also found lower resilience scores than the general population. This latter finding is particularly concerning given that resilience helps to protect against the effects of stress, and is protective against depression, anxiety, and other mental distress.

We are taking these issues very seriously and we are currently directing significant resources to further support research into these issues, and to develop appropriate programs to help veterinary students and practitioners manage the challenges of school and the workplace. The high rates of mental illness in the profession is an alarm we cannot ignore and speaks to changes in the profession that we have yet to understand.

While further research is still needed to help determine factors leading to the increase prevalence of mental health issues with in our profession, we do know our graduates are asked to know more, and work to a much higher standard of practice compared to 30 years ago. Clients are more knowledgeable and demanding, and the risks of professional failure are more serious. Research shows that Generation Y (the term used to describe the generation of our newest graduates) can be very hard on themselves, and tend towards perfectionism if given a chance, or self-recrimination if they do not have the time or resources to do the best job they can. They are typically idealistic and tend to want to contribute to a better world. They are more likely to see themselves and others as “pet parents” rather than pet owners, with all its emotional implications.

Debt is also a significant issue our new graduates face, which can sometimes be debilitating, given current salaries. Overall today’s graduates, in all fields, seek balance in their life, and expect time away from work, to decompress and keep their personal relationships healthy.

Values are important to this generation, although what they value can be different from what we valued. Today’s graduate veterinarians are a generation that typically has been closer than ever before to their parents, and they tend to expect the same kind of relationship with their employer – one characterized by a feeling of being valued and doing important work, a desire for continual professional development, along with a workplace culture of flexibility, collegiality, empathy, sharing, and mentorship.

Powered by the social channels with which they grew up, they share a lot of information with their friends, family and workplace colleagues, and don't see strict boundaries between their private and professional lives, which can be disconcerting to older generations!

We are not waiting for research results before taking steps to help this new generation of learners. We have made many modifications to our curriculum, addressing issues such as life balance and financial planning, including debt management and part time work, and a host of wellness activities. We are happy to hear that many workplaces are now much

better positioned to accommodate the needs of new graduates, both culturally and operationally, so kudos to practice owners who have made this transition – you are leading the way.

What does the near future hold with respect to hiring new doctors for your practice? Trying to predict the future is always unwise, but we can be sure our profession will continue to be challenged by many of the currents buffeting society as a whole.

Our graduates will be largely female with an urban background, typical of all new health professionals. There will be a continued expectation for a more flexible workplace, with strong mentorship in the first year.

Practices will make greater use of technology for efficiency, to tap the skills of this connected generation of doctors, and to differentiate by offering a higher quality of care to a younger and more knowledgeable, “connected” clientele.

Most new veterinarians will have many employers over the course of their career – frequent transitions between careers, and between work and home, will become the norm. There will be fewer veterinarians interested in practice ownership and those that are interested will tend to seek shared or fractional ownership models where they can have both ownership, life balance and the financial return.

One thing that will probably not change is that “culture matters”: our success with clients and employees will always be dependent on the values we have on display. That is just as true for us here at the College. We all need to reflect on this and make sure we are adapting our workplaces to the needs of this new generation of talented doctors.

I am interested in any questions or comments you might have on the topics discussed in this letter. Please feel free to email me at jwichtel@uoguelph.ca.

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