



A time for bold action

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The Canadian veterinary profession must surely applaud the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association for its initiative in taking a hard look at the profession and where it's going in the next century. The work of the Task Force on the Future of the Veterinary Profession in preparing the report *Veterinary Medicine in Canada: Opportunity for Renewal* and the consultations that are arising from it are providing a timely opportunity to deal with what can be regarded as a critical and pivotal point in the history of our profession. The Report provides many insightful analyses and makes useful recommendations. Without diminishing their worth and importance, I would, nonetheless, like to express concerns about the Report's failure to prescribe change commensurate with the magnitude of the threat to our future.

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The Report could have made a bolder stab at envisaging how the profession might best accommodate the changing needs of society in the next century. If we get this right, subjects like professional status and remuneration become less of an issue. If I interpret the Report correctly, in the final analysis, it is left to the veterinary faculties to modify curricula, select students with nonclinical career goals, and respond to advice from college Advisory Boards on how to make the adjustments to provide for society's changing needs. There is really nothing new here. It is fair to say that these processes have already been pursued by the universities for many years, albeit not as effectively as the profession might wish. In any event, the conservative nature of today's university gives one no assurance that the approach recommended is adequate to the task. The universities are doing a superb job of providing quality education to veterinary students. But is it the education that is appropriate for society's needs in the next century? I think not! Leadership for change will have to come from the organized profession, where it properly

belongs. The proposed National Action Plan could perhaps be a vehicle for this.

It is clear that the profession will continue to serve exceptionally well the needs of pet and horse owners in the long term, exploiting progress arising from the conventional medical paradigm and without any real competition from other potential service providers. However, in other fields where competition is real and growing or opportunities fleeting, one cannot be sanguine about the profession's future as a major player. Without action from the profession, these opportunities will be lost or wither away and the profession in toto will be only a small contributor to human society in comparison with its potential. Here are some reasons for this view.

If food animal production continues to intensify and becomes comprised mainly of large sophisticated production units, the expertise of the veterinarian will have to be at the cutting edge to provide economically useful herd health service. In addition to their problem solving skills, their use of epidemiological techniques to detect and manage the determinants of production has given veterinarians a competitive advantage for the moment in delivering herd health programs. But epidemiology is not a purely medical discipline, and it would be surprising if it does not become available in animal science curricula before long. When it does, graduates of such programs will be formidable competition. An animal scientist can acquire a 4-year degree plus 2 y of advanced training and still be in the work force, on average, nearly 2 y before a veterinarian who graduates after nearly 8 y (on average) with only a generalist education, topped up with the experience of streamlining in the final year and, perhaps, an animal science course or 2 taken in the preveterinary curriculum.

The long-term role of the veterinarian in food safety is also tenuous, at least in terms of involving substantial numbers of veterinarians. One of the more profound changes that have occurred in agricultural programs at the universities over the past 20 y has been the emergence and growth of programs in food science. Again veterinarians will be competing with graduates who are much more focused on a range of skills associated with food quality and safety. The discipline of epidemiology will also emerge in a food scientist's area of competence.

It is clear that societal concern with environmental issues (ecosystem health) will become increasingly important. This domain augurs to be one in which there will be tremendous growth in the need for professional services in the century ahead. It is an area in which appropriately trained veterinarians could make a great contribution. Again, unless veterinarians have the opportunity to acquire most of the necessary skills in a

reasonable time frame, that is, as part of the preveterinary and veterinary curriculum, only a few hardy souls will be willing to take more extensive postgraduate training to enable them to compete. There is also an ethical argument here. How can the veterinary profession espouse animal well-being and claim an interest in the health of at least vertebrates, if not all animals, and ignore the present loss of biodiversity?

One can make similar arguments for comparative medicine (a logical path for veterinarians interested in research or laboratory animal medicine), public health, etc. It is humbling to note that a veterinarian has never been invited to serve on either the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council or the Medical Research Council. Now, downsizing of university and government institutions has further eroded an already relatively weak veterinary research establishment in Canada. As a consequence, veterinary students are less likely to see research as a promising career path, especially in the face of a combination of debt and academic "burn-out" after nearly 8 y of university. There needs to be a way to encourage students with research potential earlier in their studies. A baccalaureate student who opts for a research career emerges fully trained, including postdoctoral studies, after a total of 10 y of university education. By contrast, a veterinarian, on average, will have only nicely begun his or her research studies after the same period. Again, the present system works against our competitiveness in the research arena and saps the potential strength of our profession.

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The bottom line in all of this is that if the profession does not act resolutely, with vision and boldness, it will dissipate much of its potential to serve the future needs of society. The actions called for in the Report are insufficient to accomplish the necessary change. The organized veterinary profession, not the universities, has the instruments necessary for leadership in making sure that society's needs are met; namely, veterinary licensure, regulation of internships, setting practice standards, and college accreditation. These tools (all having to do with standards) can be a powerful force for either changing or maintaining the status quo. They can allow the introduction of an "engineering" model in veterinary education and licensure, in which veterinary students would have to choose one of several major career paths, such as mixed practice, small animal practice, equine practice, food animal practice, public health, food

safety, comparative medicine, zoo medicine, aquaculture, or ecosystem health (wildlife), at the end of 2nd year. Examination for licensure would be tailored to the career path chosen. Some career paths might include compulsory internship, if this was desirable. This system would produce graduates with the skills to compete in new and changing fields, as well as enhance the skills of persons entering more conventional practice.

Like most members of our profession, I believe in the strength of a generalist veterinary education but contend that this should describe the situation at the end of 4 y, that is, the end of the 2nd year of the conventional veterinary curriculum, not at graduation after 6 y (in practice, nearly 8 y). Four years is sufficient time for establishing a broad education in comparative medicine that can serve as a basis for various career paths. Also, any measure that shortens the time required to acquire the necessary competence to practise in a chosen field will help to ameliorate the growing problem of student debt.

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Veterinarians have always put great stock in being able to switch careers without any requirement for more formal training. This is no longer in the public interest. In a system of more distinct career tracks, as proposed here, one can still envisage reasonable means of effecting a career change through the use of internships and continuing education, as called for in the Report.

I would also contend that a veterinary educational system, such as proposed above, would result in fewer graduates entering small animal practice and, thus, would be a welcome development in many quarters.

It seems that the Task Force has assumed that the results of a survey that suggest that 70% of the profession does not favor the engineering model (designated or limited licensure) ruled out this option. The results of the survey are hardly surprising, since many of those responding are unlikely to be very familiar with the educational needs of veterinarians who are to be competitive in new or changing fields of employment. For some, it will be also be difficult to be in favor of losing the opportunity of changing field of employment without substantial impediment. It is significant that 30% might be prepared to accept an engineering model.

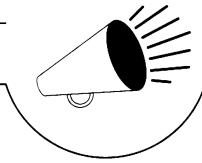
The Report alludes to the painful lesson of history that saw the profession pay a large price for its myopic focus on the horse in a world where transportation was about to change drastically. At the time, it is doubtful if there would have been much enthusiasm within the profession for changing its emphasis on the horse. A century later, we face a comparable dilemma and, potentially, a comparable penalty, if we fail to make the

necessary changes that capitalize on our present (and likely ephemeral) opportunities.

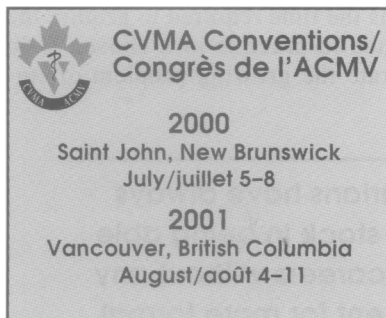
Again, I wish to emphasize appreciation for the hard work of the Task Force and the thought that has gone into the Report, and for the comprehensive way in which the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association is encouraging debate about the issues that have been raised. It

should be noted that the substance of the views expressed above were considered by the Task Force. I hope that setting them out here in more detail for the wider profession will be considered constructive and serve as useful input to an ongoing and productive debate on the future of our profession.

COMING EVENTS



ÉVÉNEMENTS À VENIR



SEPTEMBER/SEPTEMBRE 1999

20th Annual Conference and Expo — Association of Avian Veterinarians. August 31–September 4, 1999 at the Sheraton New Orleans Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Dermatology, Diagnostic Testing, Infectious Diseases and Therapeutics. Contact: Shawn Slipy or Sylvia Kornelsen, AAV Conference Office, 2121 South Oneida Street, Suite 325, Denver, Colorado 80224-2552 USA; tel.: (303) 756-8380; fax: (303) 759-8861.

Annual Meeting — British Columbia Veterinary Medical Association. September 9–12, 1999 in Victoria, British Columbia. Contact: BVCMA, 155-1200 West 73rd Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6P 6G5; tel.: (604) 266-3441; fax: (604) 266-8447.

Prescription for Success — Effective Strategies for Canadian Practices (One-day Workshop). September 11, 1999 in Edmonton, Alberta. Planning a Successful and Profitable Practice; Creating, Developing and Managing a Profitable Practice; Increasing Profitability; Attracting New and Loyal Patients. Contact: The Gibraltar Group, 62 Lombardy Crescent, Toronto, Ontario M1K 4N9; fax: (416) 266-7960.

Académie de médecine vétérinaire du Québec: Clinical Pharmacology. September 12, 1999 (language: English). Contact: Académie de médecine vétérinaire du Québec, 3625, Dagenais W. Blvd., Suite 100, Fabreville, Laval, Québec H7P 5C9; tel.: (450) 963-1812; fax: (450) 963-1952; e-mail: amvq@mblink.net.

New England Veterinary Medical Forum. September 12–14, 1999 at the

Sheraton Hotel and Convention Center in Burlington, Vermont, USA. Small animal, equine, and bovine/camelid programs. Contact: Terry Cryan, New England Veterinary Medical Association, 111 Boston Post Road, Suite 105, Sudbury, Massachusetts 01776 USA; tel.: (978) 443-6911; fax: (978) 443-0197; e-mail: cryanassoc@fiam.net.

British Equine Veterinary Association — 38th Annual Congress. September 12–15, 1999 in Harrogate, Yorkshire, United Kingdom. Contact: BEVA Congress Office, 5 Finlay Street, London SW6 6HE United Kingdom; tel.: +44 (0) 171 610 6080; fax: +44 (0) 171 610 6823; website: www.beva.org.uk.

Zimbabwe Veterinary Association — Annual Congress 1999. September 15–17, 1999 at the Cutty Sark Hotel in Kariba, Zimbabwe. "Toward the Year 2000, and the Future." Contact: George Geldart, Congress Organiser, P.O. Box CY 168, Causeway, Zimbabwe; e-mail: georgie@loffras.icon.co.zw.

Northern Ontario Veterinary Association Conference. September 16–19 at the Waltonian Inn in North Bay, Ontario. Contact: Sherri or Karen, North Bay Animal Hospital, 1875 Seymour Street, North Bay, Ontario P1B 8G4; tel.: (705) 476-8387; fax: (705) 476-7630.

Lifelearn Certificate Series in Companion Animal Ultrasound — Module I. September 17–18, 1999 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario. Contact: Anne Behnan, Lifelearn Inc., MacNabb House, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1; tel.: (519) 767-5043 or 1-800-375-7994; fax: (519) 767-1101; e-mail: abehnan@ovcnet.uoguelph.ca.

9th Annual International Conference on Diseases of Fish and Shellfish. September 19–24, 1999, Rodos Palace Hotel and Conference Centre in Rhodes, Greece. Contact: Dr. Maura Hiney, European Association of Fish Pathologists, National University of Ireland, Galway City, Republic of Ireland; tel.: +353 91 524411 X3124; fax: +353 91 750514; e-mail: maura.hiney@nuigalway.ie.

Animal Welfare and Human-Animal Interactions Group — Animal Welfare Course. September 20–24, 1999 at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge and

Birmingham University, United Kingdom. Contact: Professor D.B. Morton, Centre for Biomedical Ethics, University of Birmingham, the Medical School, Birmingham B15 2TT United Kingdom; tel.: 0121 414 3616; fax: 0121 414 6979.

American Association of Bovine Practitioners — 32nd Annual Conference. September 22–25, 1999 at the Nashville Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee, USA. Contact: AABP, P.O. Box 1755, Rome, Georgia 30162-1755 USA; fax: (706) 232-2232.

Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association — Annual General Meeting and Convention — Veterinary Venture '99. September 23–25, 1999 at the Travelodge Hotel, Regina, Saskatchewan. Contact: SVMA, #104-112 Research Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 3R3; tel.: (306) 955-7862; fax: (306) 975-0623.

British Veterinary Association Congress. September 23–26, 1999 at the Assembly Rooms in Bath, England. Contact: British Veterinary Association Congress Office, 7 Mansfield Street, London, England W1M 0AT; tel.: (44) 171 636 6541; fax: (44) 171 436 2970; e-mail: congress@bva.co.uk.

26th World Veterinary Congress/ 24th World Small Animal Veterinary Congress. September 23–29, 1999/ September 23–26, 1999 at the Palais des Congrès, Lyon, France. Contact: Mondial Vet 1999, CNVSPA, 40 rue de Berri, F-75008 Paris France; tel.: 33 (0) 1 53 83 91 60; fax: 33 (0) 1 53 83 91 69; website: www.mondialvet99.org; e-mail: mondialvet@aol.com.

Lifelearn Certificate Series in Companion Animal Endoscopy — Module III. September 24–25, 1999 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario. Contact: Anne Behnan, Lifelearn Inc., MacNabb House, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1; tel.: (519) 767-5043 or 1-800-375-7994; fax: (519) 767-1101; e-mail: abehnan@ovcnet.uoguelph.ca.

Annual Meeting — New Brunswick Veterinary Medical Association. September 25, 1999. Contact: NBVMA, P.O. Box 1065, Moncton, New Brunswick E1C 8P2; tel.: (506) 851-7654; fax: (506) 851-2524.