

More on the "information explosion"

Dear Sir:

I am surprised that the Editor of the Canadian Veterinary Journal fell for Dr. M. E. White's argument that there is no "information explosion" in veterinary medicine (1,2). At a time when it is popularly said that there are more scientists alive than have ever lived, it is surely a belief which requires more careful thought. Weighing copies of the *Index Medicus* and the *Index Veterinarius* does not give the whole picture of what has happened in recent veterinary history, which is a "specialization explosion".

An indication of this development of specialization may be gained from a cursory study of library acquisitions at the Ontario Veterinary College. Limiting this to British and North American professional and specialist veterinary journals, before 1960 the library had 17 professional veterinary journals (including the Canadian Veterinary Journal, the Veterinary Record, and the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association). Since then, 33 new and continuing journals have been added. In 5-year averages these are: 1960-1964, 6; 1965-1969, 5; 1970-1975, 6; 1976-1980, 10; 1981-1988, 6. These journals include practitioner-oriented journals such as *Journal of Small Animal Practice* (1960), *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association* (1965), *Equine Veterinary Journal* (1968), *Veterinary Clinics of North America*

(1971, 1979, 1985), the *Compendium on Continuing Education for the Practicing Veterinarian* (1979), as well as more specialist journals such as *Veterinary Microbiology* (1976). These numbers do not include species newsletters and proceedings. The library has suffered budget cuts and does not hold journals in such rapidly developing areas of veterinary involvement as aquatic animal medicine and biology.

Although he recognizes specialization, Dr. White's idea that there is no information explosion may have the consequence of delaying reforms in veterinary curricula and licencing, which would be unfortunate.

Yours sincerely,
John F. Prescott, Vet MB, PhD
*Department of Veterinary Microbiology and Immunology,
Ontario Veterinary College,
University of Guelph,
Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1*

References

1. Maxie MG. Debunking the "information explosion" myth. *Can Vet J* 1988; 29: 615.
2. White ME. Let's stop loose talk about the "information explosion". *Can Vet J* 1988; 29: 619-620.

Editor's reply

Dear Sir:

I believe that Dr. White's point was that the growth of the veterinary literature should not be blown out of proportion; I strongly concur with this opinion. Exaggeration of the growth of the literature can easily lead to a feeling of frustration on the part of the veterinary student and veterinarian — "Knowledge is advancing so quickly that it's impossible to keep up, so I won't even try." By overwhelming students with a distorted concept of an information explosion, their innate curiosity may be stifled and good habits of continuing education may not be established early. Also, as noted by Dr. White, misconceptions about an information explosion may impede rather than promote curricular reform.

A distinction should be drawn between an information explosion and a literature explosion. There is no doubt that the *literature* is rapidly expanding. However, the actual *knowledge* contained in this

literature is expanding at a far less rapid rate. Many articles in the new journals noted by Dr. Prescott are actually reviews, and while they may be pleasant and useful reading, they usually do not constitute a contribution to knowledge. Similarly, yet another case report on say aorticiliac thrombosis in a cat adds to the literature and may refresh the reader's memory, but it adds little to knowledge. When the literature is read *critically*, it is manageable.

I remain unswayed and unapologetic. Keeping up with the literature is possible, it is part of our professional responsibility, and it is a desire that should be instilled and nurtured early in one's career.

Grant Maxie, DVM, PhD
*Veterinary Laboratory Services
Box 3612
Guelph, Ontario N1H 6R8*