

PERSPECTIVES

Community and family: a personal perspective on the past and future of veterinary science

I came to veterinary practice with a different view of the profession from most new graduates. I grew up in a mixed veterinary practice in a large Queensland country town. Well, technically *above* the practice rather than in it, but considering that I spent every possible moment in the surgery my father ran from under our house, I might as well have lived there. I begged for a part-time job as soon as I was tall enough to see over the front desk, and I worked part-time as a receptionist/kennel cleaner/nurse/assistant surgeon on and off for the next ten years. I knew the industry from the inside; it held no false glamour, no unjustified promise of wealth for me. I knew it so well that my previously unwavering determination to gain a BVSc faltered slightly in my final year of high school. As I wondered whether I really wanted to be a vet, my father spoke some magical words that cut to the core of the veterinary profession, as it was back then, and renewed my resolve to become a veterinary surgeon, although not for the reasons you might expect.

Trying to guide me to what he saw as the best career choice for me, Dad said, 'Do medicine instead, there's no money in being a vet. And besides, vet science is no job for a woman.'

He saw veterinary practice as hard, physical work, for little financial reward, yet he remained in practice. In fact, he still practices today. I doubt, back then, that Dad could have told me why he continued as a veterinarian in private practice, but I think I know. As a profession, we have always had a unique sense of community, almost of family. In a country as large as Australia, with a profession as diverse and demanding as veterinary science, that sense of community has kept many a practitioner going when there was every other reason to walk away. There has always been support, both professional and personal, available to any veterinarian. Our fellows, with whom we graduated, have always held a special place in our hearts; the veterinarians who lectured us at university, or with whom we saw practice during our clinical years of training, became life-long mentors, and often continued to teach us long after graduation.

Those relationships sustained us at times when our patients inexplicably died on us, our clients got their bills and screamed at us, or our bosses had a bad day and threatened to fire us. In fact, in many cases, they still do, and peer support has been documented, both in the medical profession¹ and in the veterinary profession², as a tool to reduce stress and ultimately burnout. I hope that sense of community, of family, will continue to be part of the veterinary industry for a very long time, although I worry that it

may be in decline. Despite my background, I found myself part of that decline. There are many factors that contributed to my own decreased participation in the veterinary community. The two biggest were time and money. The increasing time commitment required to run a small business in Australia, with taxation and reporting requirements, increasingly complex human resource issues, local government red tape and more time spent ensuring that litigious factors in our society don't have the chance to sue me, all contributed to less time available to spend in our community. I have a growing family and the more they grow, the more time they take and the more they cost, so I had even less time as well as less money available for travel and accommodation to participate in our community. There is a third factor that was just as important when it came to my decreasing involvement: apathy. I simply lost the drive that I used to have to change the world. I considered that perhaps it was simply a factor of age, perhaps it was burnout precipitated by the stress of the first two factors. Certainly I was chronically exhausted. However, it was real and it was a significant contributor to my lack of involvement.

My challenge was how to overcome these factors. I am sure many veterinarians in the Australian veterinary community face the same obstacles. In fact, poor remuneration, loss of interest in veterinary work, and caring for family are amongst the top five reasons given by veterinarians for leaving the profession.³

I did not want *my* answer to be to simply leave an industry that I love and the job I think I am quite good at. I wanted more than that from the investment I have made during the last decade and a half. Instead, I spent some time considering the factors that were causing my dissatisfaction. I thought about the reasons I loved being a veterinarian. The main one, constant through all the years, was my appreciation for the veterinary community – the family that made up my industry. The end result? I made a plan for rejuvenation – of my interest and involvement in this veterinary community.

A new American study of medical doctors found that physician control over the work environment, order in the clinical setting, and clinical meaning, significantly reduced emotional exhaustion⁴ – I can believe that. I think that emotional exhaustion really was contributing to my apathy. I knew if I could address the cause, the symptom should reduce – it is basic medicine and it makes perfect sense. My plan was to make some changes in my practice. I decided to respect my team of nurses enough to allow them to



use their clinical skills. They could triage, perform non-surgical procedures and generally ease the load a little. That meant less time pressure and rush for me: 'Order in the clinical setting'. Moreover, their morale received a huge boost.

What about clinical meaning? I think as veterinarians, we achieve more clinical meaning from our cases than most physicians do, simply because we are often able to follow them through from initial presentation to conclusion. Medical doctors often do not have that luxury. However, I began to ensure I consciously followed each case through, or assigned another member of my team to do it and report back to me if I was unable to attend to it personally. Next, I addressed control over the work environment: I interpreted this to mean less chaos. I needed to learn to deal with things as they arose, rather than relegating them to my to-do pile. I asked our office manager to assist me with that. She was very happy not to have my untidy stacks of 'I will-do-it-later' clutter hanging around the practice. The changes worked, and not just for me. We inspire our employees by example, and as my attitude changed, so did the attitude of the people working with me. Our whole team lost the apathy that used to surround us.

When I assessed my time-poor schedule, I found more challenges. I simply could not create more hours in the day. Instead, I decided to schedule my time better. I rostered myself time to maintain the business separately from my clinical time, instead of trying to do it all at once. That means I roster less clinical time for myself, but now, when I am 'on' I am able to focus on the task at hand, rather than thinking about what I am not doing in my other role as practice leader. I handed over more administrative duties to my office manager, too (that is what I pay her for) instead of trying to do it all myself. In addition, I began to schedule time off work to spend with my family and in the veterinary community. After all, what is the point of being the boss if you cannot?

Then we come to money.

It seemed simple until this part, until I realised that all of those fantastic initiatives detailed above were going to cost more. But I came up with a plan to deal with that, although it initially caused much trepidation. I started charging properly.

I have come to believe that the veterinary profession, particularly in Australia, is suffering from a severe and chronic case of low self-esteem. *Very* low self-esteem.

As a profession, our relationships with our clients are often almost apologetic. In fact, we constantly apologise for and discount our fees, directly and, more often, indirectly. Price shaving because an account seems too much, or not charging consumables, or incidentals like nail trims, are all indirect discounts that I am sure we have all been guilty of. We tell ourselves that clients will not do what we say, before we have even told them what we want, sabotaging our recommendations before the client receives them. We beat ourselves up over missed diagnoses, litigation risks and medication side effects. We accept, often unquestioningly, that it is our fault that clients cannot afford treatment. And we

worry that it is not fair to recommend treatment based on an educated guess after diagnostic procedures draw a blank. Do we forget that our education, experience and instinct are what our clients are (supposed to be) paying us for?

I decided I had more professional self-esteem than that. I stopped shaving those prices. The funny part is that the cost per visit did not increase markedly. The clients did not even notice. But, in hindsight, indirect discounting had been costing me tens of thousands of dollars each year – more than enough to fund the changes I needed to make.

There was another facet to my plan, too. I decided to start to strengthen the veterinary community in my own backyard, so to speak. I started really talking to the people in practices in my area, start thinking of them as colleagues, rather than competition. I knew we could achieve a lot if we could develop that sense of community in our locality. We even began to trade resources; one practice has an ultrasound, another a visiting specialist, we have in-house biochemistry and haematology, as well as some groundbreaking patient care practices that arose from the changes I made. And we all have different areas of expertise. We began to network and to work collaboratively, rather than competitively. It was wonderful to widen my resources, so there are more places to turn to, people to bounce ideas off, when I have a case that is difficult to diagnose, or refractory to treatment.

It did not take long. That sense of community reached out and wrapped me, reassuringly, in its embrace. The community was already strengthened simply because I had reaffirmed my commitment to it. By not taking it for granted, it grew.

Perhaps it is time we did more. As a profession, perhaps we should take stock and make some changes on an industry level, in the same way as I committed to personal change. We need to nurture and foster our community as a unique and important part of our profession, beginning with undergraduates. The Australian Veterinary Association's (AVA) New Graduate Friendly Practice scheme, as well as AVA recent graduate dinners, take a step in the right direction. They aim to make sure new graduates are supported in practice, and allow them to debrief with others in the same situation. They help to mitigate the traumas that can precipitate career choice dissatisfaction, but they do not, and cannot, teach our profession better self-esteem. If professional self-esteem also plays a part in our profession's problems, how do we fix it? I do not like our chances of getting the entire veterinary profession in for group therapy, and for some of us, it may already be a case of too little, too late. We can, however, start at the undergraduate level. Teaching veterinary students how to make treatment recommendations that clients will accept, teaching them that most veterinarians operate on 'gut feeling' when diagnostics fail to give us the answers we need, teaching them that we're all overwhelmed at times, teaching them how and where and when to ask for help are all further steps in the right direction. Fostering the sense of community should also start at this level. The internet, with tools like email and instant messaging, provides low cost, easily accessible tools for ensuring

new graduates stay in touch with their alumni and teachers. Regular, structured debriefing sessions in the months after graduation could play an invaluable role in new graduate life.

Those of us who are able need to offer our services as mentors to our younger colleagues, to ensure that our community remains multi-generational, drawing on both the enthusiasm of youth and the strength of experience to flourish. In doing so, however, we need to be conscious of our own limitations – we must not bequeath our insecurities as well as our knowledge to newer generations of practitioners!

I think we must also try to teach our new graduates to aim for balance in their lives, something that previous generations of veterinarians are still striving to achieve. I think that if we, as a profession, give ourselves permission to be human beings, and acknowledge the wonderful contribution we make to the health and welfare of our patients and their families, then that work-life balance might just fall into place. I am going to try it and see!

I wonder if my father went through this same process during his career. He has never spoken about it, although he has re-invented himself in different veterinary roles at intervals during his career. I really should ask him – we need to stop hiding the truth about veterinary practice from each other and from ourselves. Fostering open and honest communication is one of the factors that can help our community to go from strength to strength. In fact, communication as an issue is something we need to address right from the start with our undergraduates. Many undergraduates and new graduates feel unprepared and uncomfortable with communication issues.⁵ The importance of communication becomes even more obvious over time, with a high proportion of recent veterinary graduates rating the importance of interpersonal skills more highly than they did as undergraduates.⁶ By ensuring that veterinary students in the clinical years are equipped with good communications skills, we can therefore help them to decrease the discomfort they feel with communication; we can ensure they have the tools to effectively debrief their learning and clinical experiences; and we can expect better communication within our industry and thus a stronger veterinary community.

If we think of our industry as a community and our undergraduates as the children of that community, our perspective of veterinary education may change a little. As a parent, I need to ensure that my own children are equipped with the life-skills they need to flourish as adults: the ability to communicate effectively, a solid grounding in family, a commitment to lifelong learning, and the

basic knowledge that will allow them to know where to seek answers to the questions that will inevitably arise in their lives. We as a community need to aspire to no less for our veterinary 'children.' These are qualities demonstrated by the most personally and professionally successful veterinarians of any generation. These are also the veterinarians who contribute the most to the veterinary community. Let us equip more of our 'children' to be successful, to contribute and grow our community.

I truly believe that reviving our flagging sense of community is the answer to many of the challenges facing the profession today. A strong community can foster better professional self-esteem. A strong community can prepare its 'children' better for their adult lives. A strong community shares resources and supports its members.

For me, the veterinary community is a resource I draw upon each day, a source of comfort and succour; a wealth of information and experience. I believe it is certainly worth investing in, worth fighting for. It is our community that supports me when I lose a patient, or when a client takes their frustration out on me. It is our community that re-inspires my passion for my work when it is flagging.

It is the past and the future of our profession.

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