

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Veterinary Medicine in the Post Land Grant Era

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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A century ago, there were three types of veterinary colleges. The majority were for-profit schools of varying quality, located in major cities, with their focus on horses. These schools could not be sustained past the 1920s due to decreased enrollment as the role of the horse became diminished with the advent of the internal combustion engine. An additional factor in the fate of these colleges was the increased scrutiny applied to private, for-profit veterinary and medical schools, as the professions improved their regulatory standards.

A small handful of veterinary programs was affiliated with their respective medical schools, such as those at Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, New York University and George Washington University. Of this second cohort, only the veterinary college at Penn survived.

The third type of veterinary college was connected to the land grant initiative. Established in response to the Morrill Act of 1862, land-grant institutions (one per state or territory and predominantly located in towns or small cities) were designed to provide practical education in agriculture, engineering and the sciences. Starting with Cornell University in 1868, veterinary programs were developed at nine land grant universities over the next few decades. Iowa State University founded the first publicly funded (land-grant) veterinary college in 1879.

The number of land-grant veterinary colleges continued to grow, as another series was established following World War II and a final series in the 1970s. Like the early land grant veterinary schools, most of these more recent additions were located in smaller communities apart from preeminent medical schools. In some states, the colleges were located in towns without substantive transportation hubs.

Today only two veterinary colleges, at Penn and Ohio State, are located in the 40 most populous U.S. cities. In addition to the rural sequestration, a geographic imbalance has occurred, favoring placement of colleges in the Midwest and southern states compared to the east and west coasts.

It could be said that the land-grant system saved veterinary medicine in the early 20th century. The agricultural lobby was often the dominant political force in advocating for new veterinary colleges, with all but four of the current 28 located at land-grant universities. Without the emphasis on livestock and food production, as well as having core financial support provided by state governments, veterinary medicine might otherwise have floundered as the horse lost its central role in transportation and industry.

In today's world, however, I believe that the dominance of the land grant system in veterinary education represents a serious challenge for sustainability of the profession. Starting in the years following the Great Depression, migration from rural to urban and suburban areas was accompanied by a massive growth in numbers of household pets and other companion animals. Meanwhile, livestock production became concentrated on larger agricultural units, requiring fewer veterinarians. Today less than 10% of veterinarians work with livestock or food production systems.

Despite this dramatic expansion of the mission of veterinary medicine, state support for veterinary colleges is still largely based upon the needs for livestock management and safe food production. While these remain a fundamental responsibility of veterinarians, they do not adequately address the larger and more diverse missions of the profession, particularly the role of healthy and well-adjusted pets in enhancing human health and well-being.

To assure sustainability of veterinary colleges in the present era, we need to proactively and enthusiastically embrace the responsibility that veterinarians have to support an expanded family profile that often includes pets. In responding to this enhanced mission, we must adapt a bold new approach for public funding that emphasizes the role of veterinarians as critical members of the medical health community. While this includes the veterinarians' role in public health and the prevention and control of diseases that are transmitted from animals to people, we must acknowledge the crucial role of household pets and other companion animals in promoting both physical and emotional health of people at all stages of life.

In practical terms, the public funding of veterinary colleges should be broadened to reflect the new reality and not remain solely grounded in the land grant mission and the provenance of departments of agriculture.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.