

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Five Days in July: Catalyzing a New Wave of Women's Leadership in the AVMA

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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When Dr. Karen Bradley ran for reelection to the House Advisory Committee of the American Veterinary Medical Association last week, nobody anticipated that the outcome would be so much larger than her own candidacy.

As the chair, and the only woman on the seven-member Committee, it would normally have been a foregone conclusion that she would be reelected for a second three-year term. Many members of the House of Delegates (HOD), for which the House Advisory Committee serves as executive board, feel that Dr. Bradley has been a highly-effective chair, engaging members and working tirelessly and fairly for the good of the entire body.



*Karen Bradley, DVM, Co-owner Onion River Animal Hospital, Middlesex, VT
Member AVMA House of Delegates and Past President, House Advisory Committee
(Photo provided by the American Veterinary Medical Association)*

However, she also chairs the AVMA's Governance Engagement Team that is responsible for gathering reactions to proposed changes in the governance of the AVMA and for proposing a final model for consideration. Some delegates felt that change was occurring too rapidly and without sufficient consultation with HOD membership.¹

So at last Friday's HOD meeting when Dr. Bradley stood with four men for election to fill the three open seats on the House Advisory Committee, she was not renewed for a second three-year term. The stunning outcome reverberated across the floor and spilled out into the halls as the seven-member House Advisory Committee returned to being all male, having had only two women members in its history.²

AVMA President Douglas Aspros was presiding over the association's 150th anniversary celebration and expressed shock and deep disappointment in the outcome. "A historic convention, but bad outcomes for the HOD and great grist for the mill as we advocate for change," he confided.³ The president of one large state veterinary association was so angered that she walked out of the meeting in frustration.

Though I am not a member of the HOD and didn't attend the debate that preceded the vote, my personal view of Dr. Bradley is that she is one of the brightest, most engaging, and diligent members of the HOD and of the profession. Only 17 years after graduating from the University of Georgia, she is also one of the youngest members of the HOD and serves as a powerful role model for the millennial generation.

Women have been the majority of graduating veterinarians for almost three decades and now comprise almost 55% of the veterinarians in the country. The percentage of women students is now 78.5% and many college's graduate well over 80% women.

Though women have increased their representation in veterinary associations in several states, the two major executive bodies of the AVMA have not kept pace. The 20-member Executive Board has just three women⁴ and all of the voting members are men. This includes those who represent the 11 geographic districts across the country.⁵ The House of Delegates, which represents the states and constituency groups is approximately 25% women.

Reflecting on the open discussion that HOD delegates and alternates shared towards the end of the meeting, one member told me how confident she was that all members genuinely care about the profession and want the best outcome. Furthermore, it is my personal observation that the AVMA leadership at all levels genuinely feels that we need more women in senior leadership positions in our organization.

Where we sometimes differ is in determining the speed with which change in governance should occur. As it pertains to gender, do we wait patiently as more women move through a sluggish and leaking pipeline, or do we adopt policies and practices to deal with some of the institutional barriers that often limit women's involvement in senior leadership?

Though many were filled with anger and angst over the outcome of the House Advisory Committee vote last Friday, the frustration and despondency quickly turned to determination. While Dr. Bradley accepted the outcome with equanimity, she realized the decision would serve as the catalyst for a new, coordinated movement that would encourage more qualified women to step forward and seek election and appointment in leadership positions.

At the AVMA meeting next year in Denver, I believe we will look back on the sesquicentennial's *Five Days in July* as defining the strategy and mobilizing the membership toward a new era in women's leadership in organized veterinary medicine.

¹ Despite the fact that a comment period of all members is now in place.

² Dr. Barbara Schmidt, now AVMA Treasurer, previously served on the House Advisory Committee.

³ Aspros, Douglas (AVMA president, now past president), email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013 July 25.

⁴ Dr. Barbara Schmidt, AVMA Treasurer; Dr. Elizabeth Curry-Galvin, AVMA Assistant Executive Vice President

⁵The other four members of the Executive Board (all currently male) are the AVMA President, Immediate Past President, President-Elect and Vice President.

KEYWORDS:

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TOPICS

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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.