

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Making of an AVMA President: Dr. Clark Fobian

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Dr. Clark Fobian was installed as president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) at the organization's 150th annual meeting in Chicago last week. For the next 12 months, he will be in the most visible position to represent the veterinary profession to the country and to the world.

Dr. Fobian grew up in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, the son of a brick layer contractor who had not finished high school. He is the fourth graduate of the University of Missouri's College of Veterinary Medicine to hold the position of AVMA president.

Last February, I had the opportunity to interview Clark and his wife, Rita, while attending the Western Veterinary Conference in Las Vegas.¹ He related to me that his interest in veterinary medicine was stimulated by childhood trips to the zoo.

I had a natural passion for animals, all kinds of animals. As a child, one of my favorite activities was visiting the reptile house at the St. Louis Zoo. As I entered my teen years, it was not so much that I wanted to be a large animal veterinarian or a dog or cat veterinarian, I just knew I wanted involvement with animals. These were also extremely scientific decades and if you put on a white lab coat, your status in society was automatically quite high.

Clark entered Missouri University in 1968 to major in wildlife biology, and followed with a DVM at the University of Missouri (1977).

After four years working as an associate in two mixed animal practices,² he and Rita purchased an existing building on a well-traveled road for \$60,000 and "started literally with sledge hammers to gut the structure and built a practice that was restricted to small animals." After practicing solo for eight years, Fobian hired his first associate and in 1996, moved into a larger clinic with expanded services.³

Dr. Fobian's rise to presidency of the AVMA has a steep trajectory. For his first 13 years as a veterinarian, his contribution was that of a dues-paying member, something he espoused with

conviction to be an important obligation for all veterinarians, even when money is tight in those early, debt-repaying years after graduation.

During those early years, he and Rita regularly attended the meetings of the West Central Missouri Veterinary Medical Association (VMA). At one of those meetings, Dr. Fobian was elected as a director of the state association and started to attend the executive board meetings of the Missouri VMA.

I was so excited by the way those veterinarians diligently looked at issues that affected the profession, trying to make informed and wise decisions for the benefit of our association. I was enthralled! I was hooked! It was like going to a religious revival and going up and saying 'I'm ready to be baptized and I'll do the work of the Lord from here on out'. I was at that time baptized, it seemed, into organized veterinary medicine.

After serving on the Missouri VMA Executive Board for several years, Dr. Fobian wanted to devote more time to building his new practice and also help raise their two teenage children. But before he could fully step aside, he was encouraged to return to the executive board and soon after, he accepted the invitation to run for President-elect of the state association. He served as president in 2003, and chair of the board the following year.

When a vacancy for the AVMA Executive Board was anticipated for his District, Clark was encouraged to run by a valued mentor and past chair of the executive board, Dr. Bud Hertzog.⁴ The dean of the state's veterinary college, Dr. Joe Kornegay, made a similar request.⁵ His encouragement was expressed as follows:

*Clark, there's a boat at the dock and that boat is going to be leaving soon. You can either stand there and watch it go without you, or can run for it and make a jump for the deck. You're either going to land on the deck or you're going to miss it and splash in the water. If you hit the water, we are there to pull you out. **But if you land on the deck you are going to have the ride of your life.** Rita and I made that run and we were elected as the Executive Board member for the six-state District VII.*

Going from an entry-level executive board member to being president-elect required "a very steep learning curve, and was extensive." Clark gained knowledge directly and from networking. Colleagues trusted him to provide "perspective, being able to take the facts and come up with a course of action appropriate to the situation." Rita commented, "When he speaks, people listen to him because he has thought things out and can relay complex themes using analogies people understand in different ways and from different perspectives."

Dr. Fobian also speaks in almost reverential terms about the executive board, achieving consensus among the 15 voting members who use individual thought and perspective to come up with a unified, collaborative decision.⁶ If the course you are looking at is the right one, you should be able to communicate that to your colleagues and make the appropriate choices.”

As president, Dr. Fobian will continue as a contributing member of the executive board and will continue to help assure its tradition of working as a team. He will also travel extensively throughout the US and abroad, representing veterinarians in all walks of life.



Dr. Clark and Mrs. Rita Fobian, on vacation.

Photo provided by Mrs. Fobian, 2013

Dr. Fobian feels that the AVMA as well as state and regional associations represent the preventive medicine of the veterinary profession. R. Scott Nolan, writing about his address to the AVMA House of Delegates reported that Dr. Fobian “likened the veterinary profession to a [pet] whose health is protected through preventive care....The profession is the pet and the AVMA is the veterinarian ensuring its well-being”.⁷

Dr. Fobian’s central theme to his colleagues is to be engaged in the veterinary associations whether in your district, state association or at the national level. This is a form of leadership that we all can understand and support.

¹ Fobian, Clark (President-elect of the AVMA, now President). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) at the Western Veterinary Conference in Las Vegas, NV. 2013, Feb 18.

² Nevada, MO and Marshall, MO

³ Thompson Hills Animal Clinic, Sedalia, MO

⁴ Robert E. Hertzog, DVM University of Missouri 1956, Lees Summit Animal Hospital, Lees Summit, MO

⁵ Joe N. Kornegay, DVM (Texas A&M University, 1973), PhD, former Dean University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine.

⁶ There are also five non-voting members of the Executive Board and they contribute to the discussion along with the voting members.

⁷ Nolan, R. Scott, Preventive care: good for animals and the profession. In AVMA Annual Convention Daily News, 2013, July 21.

KEYWORDS:

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Dr. Robert E. Hertzog

TOPICS:

AVMA Presidents

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.