

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

1892: After Epic Struggle, Veterinary Colleges Adopt a Three-Year Curriculum

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The length of the veterinary curriculum was the source of dissension and discord during the formative years of our profession. The curricular length varied from two brief terms of study (at some for-profit schools), to four full academic years (at Cornell, before it became a state college).¹

Acrimonious debate and name-calling between the supporters of a more rigorous educational program and those who were intent on enrolling as many tuition-paying students as possible played out in numerous editorials and in the national meetings of the United States Veterinary Medical Association (USVMA), the forerunner of the AVMA.

The 1892 meeting of the USVMA in Boston pitted the private schools run by entrepreneurial individuals against the eastern schools affiliated with medical colleges. The latter group, led by the physicians who were deans of veterinary medicine at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, were supported by the leadership of the McKillip Veterinary College, the more progressive of the two major Chicago colleges.

Though the debates unfolded behind closed doors, “recollections of the meeting were [sufficiently] vivid” that they were recounted by the early 20th century sage, Dr. L. A. Merillat, over half a century later when the AVMA returned to Boston for its annual meeting.²

Merillat wrote that the Boston meeting provided the “first successful step toward the present educational status of veterinary medicine.” He then described the conflict between the two factions in war-like terms:

Here was the Boston line-up: the Hughes-Baker-Withers Chicago Veterinary College, Liautard’s American Veterinary College, and Wattle’s new Kansas City Veterinary College on the two-year front and Huidekoper’s University of Pennsylvania, Osgood-Lyman’s Harvard, and MacEachern’s Montreal Veterinary College, and McKillip’s new corporation ... occupying the three-year trenches. ...

When the smoke cleared away, the two-year army under the generals heretofore named was retreating and three years later, under a continuous bombardment, it surrendered unconditionally.³

Perhaps they did not contribute to the debate or the political infighting, but in either case, Merillat failed to credit Iowa State College (now University) for instituting a veterinary curriculum that is thought to have been the first three-year program in the country. Though Cornell's program was four years in length at the time, Principal James Law was also only given passing mention because he was still awaiting appropriation from the State to legitimize his program and make it open to larger numbers of students. The other college leader standing on the sidelines was another Scot, Andrew Smith, who kept his popular, two mid-winter-session program in Toronto outside of the debate. There was no use exposing his high-enrollment college to greater scrutiny than necessary.

The battle for the three-year curriculum had been waged for over two decades. Now that it had been achieved, both sides began to prepare for another round to address the desirability for a four-year curriculum. That issue was settled in 1917, at the Kansas City meeting. By that time, the organization's name had been changed to the AVMA, Harvard had been closed for 15 years, and the University of Pennsylvania had been led for over a generation by deans who were veterinarians.

¹ When the New York State Veterinary College was established by the State of New York, the curriculum was reduced from four to three years.

² Merillat, L.A. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 1946 Vol CVIII, No. 831, p 839-840.

³ *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

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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.