

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The White Coat Ceremony and the Symbolic Induction to the Veterinary Profession

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with assistance from Charlie Powell
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Entering veterinary students sometimes struggle with the idea that they become part of the veterinary community when they begin their DVM education, rather than upon receiving their diploma four years later. They should be assured by faculty and their mentors that by gaining admission to an accredited college of veterinary medicine, they have already passed the most critical threshold to becoming a veterinarian.

As educators and colleagues, we should be stressing the fundamental importance of treating veterinary students as professionals from day one, insisting they respect and uphold the highest ideals of the profession beginning with their college years.

Recognition of this concept in human medical education took a large step forward in 1993 at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons in the form of the "White Coat Ceremony."¹ Inspired by Dr. Arnold Gold, a pediatric neurologist, the college initiated a tradition that established expectations and responsibilities of medical students before their first day of class. This accountability was symbolically fortified with the administration of the Hippocratic Oath and the public donning of a white coat in the company of family members and close friends.

Six years later in 1999, Washington State University (WSU) adopted a parallel version of the medical school's White Coat Ceremony for entering veterinary medical students. The ceremony was to provide "a mechanism by which values that are key to the profession can be openly articulated and carefully considered in the company of peers, parents, partners and faculty."² It was a transformative move by WSU's administration and had support from the state association and the college's alumni association. Now conducted at the end of WSU's first-year student orientation period, Dr. Doug Jasmer, Associate Dean of Student Services, says that, "*the White Coat Ceremony is intended as a capstone ceremony to conclude a week-long orientation that is foundational to the personal professional development that will occur during the four year DVM program.*"³



*Dr. Douglas Jasmer, Associate Dean for Student and Academic Affairs,
addressing the 2013 White Coat Ceremony
at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine
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Most medical⁴ and veterinary schools followed the leads of Columbia and Washington State. I have had the opportunity to witness the similarity of those parallel messages as the parent of a medical student⁵ and dean of a veterinary college.⁶

As might be expected, there are individual differences among veterinary colleges in the way that the ceremony is conducted. At Washington State, for example, the Veterinarian's Oath, which is recited in some veterinary colleges, is replaced by the "Veterinary Student Oath."⁷ At Cornell University, the ceremony is held immediately prior to the beginning of semester six, the formal clinical portion of the curriculum, rather than at matriculation.

The White Coat ceremony does not, by itself, instill the values and commitment to the veterinary profession. However, it does go a long way toward letting our newest colleagues understand that we are serious about embracing them as members of the profession while they are in their student role, and that acceptance to veterinary college signifies an open door to the profession of veterinary medicine.



First-year students in the Class of 2003 at Washington State University receiving their white coats in the first such ceremony in veterinary medicine in fall 1999.
(© Henry Moore Jr. BCU/WSU, 2013)

In my missive to the Class of 2017 that appeared on this site on August 11, 2013, I also urged our newest members of the veterinary profession to think of themselves as committed, practicing veterinarians at the start of their education and not wait until they graduate in four years. *“If you are not prepared to think, act and develop the confidence and moral compass of a successful and ethical veterinarian as you walk through the doors of your future Alma mater this fall,”* I wrote, *“then this may not be the profession for you.”*⁸ I invite my veterinary colleagues to similarly encourage their newest protégés.

Acknowledgement:

The author thanks Mr. Charlie Powell, Washington State University CVM for his assistance in preparing this story.

¹ [White Coat Ceremony](#). The Arnold P. Gold Foundation.

² [The White Coat Ceremony](#). Washington State University, College of Veterinary Medicine. Announcements from the CVM. 2013 August 19.

³ Jasmer, Doug Assoc Dean, WSU CVM). Quote provided in e-mail from Charles Powell (WSU CVM) to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013, Sept 13.

⁴ In the 20 years since Columbia introduced it in 1993, the White Coat Ceremony has become tradition in 130 schools of medicine and osteopathy in the US and other countries. [White Coat Ceremony, 20 Years Later](#). Columbia University Medical Center. 2013, August 6.

⁵ I attended the White Coat Ceremony at Yale University School of Medicine in 2006.

⁶ Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, where I served as dean 1997-2007. With the encouragement and support of the College Alumni Executive Board, and the College Advisory Council, we instituted the White Coat Ceremony in 2004.

⁷ The Veterinary Student Oath at Washington State’s College of Veterinary Medicine:

“As a veterinary student in the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, I promise to work conscientiously to develop my scientific and medical knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the

protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

Throughout my time here as a student, I will conduct myself with dignity and professionalism, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics. I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.”

⁸ Smith, Donald F. Advice to New Veterinary Students: Class of 2017. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. August 11, 2013.

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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.