Editor's Note: On July 31, 2014, Good News for Pets posted an interview with me conducted by Lea-Ann Germinder in which we focused on the historical perspective of women in veterinary leadership roles. Below are excerpts adapted from that interview.

Donald F. Smith

By Lea-Ann Germinder
August 21, 2014

Additional excerpts can be found on YouTube, Women in Veterinary Leadership from an Historical Perspective: Interview with Dr. Don Smith.

Ms. Germinder: You have a long, illustrious career as dean of the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine, but tell us how you got involved with the Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative.

Dr. Smith: I was dean at Cornell from 1997 to 2007. During that period, I became interested in the history of veterinary medicine and decided that if we were going to learn from history, we should do it through people. So, I took great interest in those who had come to the veterinary profession in the 1920’s and 1930’s, and I started to get their stories. I knew a lot of them, because when you’re dean, you get to meet a lot of people.

I remember in June 2007, listening to a 1934 graduate whom I knew well, hold court with the students. A blind man in a wheelchair, he described what it was like to have radiologic burns on his hands back in the early 1940’s. The wife of one of our older alumni came up and, placing her hand on my shoulder, said, “Dr. Smith, you’ve got to get their stories.”
I developed a plan to interview as many of the 20 graduates of the 1930’s from Cornell as I could. Shortly thereafter I interviewed probably about 10 or 11 of them, either directly or through their surviving spouses, and that launched a whole initiative on my attempt to understand the history of veterinary medicine. I started a course on the history of veterinary medicine, which was centered on those stories, now in its fifth year.

Previously, I had begun to learn about the early women of veterinary medicine, particularly those who had graduated from Cornell between 1910 and 1949 and about the year 2000, I gave my first paper on them accompanied by an online presentation. I knew many of those women well and learned their stories about anti-Semitism, anti-gender issues and what it was like. My interest in that led to working on issues associated with people struggling to become veterinarians and what it takes to gain access to become a veterinarian.

About two years ago, when the Kelly Report (the Workforce Report) came out, I saw that associates make less than owners in practice, an issue which disturbed me. And, of course, women make less than men. We all know that. But when I saw that associates who were women make less than associates who are owners—and as we know, 80 percent of the graduates now are women—I thought, we have to get to those women who are going into practice and somehow figure out how more of them can become owners, or we’re going to be like Walgreens, where veterinarians just become, for the most part, employed by somebody else. I met with a couple of people, one of whom was Julie Kumble, who has since become my associate.

About 18 or 20 months ago we started interviewing women leaders in practice, in organized veterinary medicine, in industry, and in academia with a current total of about 40 people. Following the 2013 AVMA convention, I wrote a blog called Five Days in July, addressing issues associated with Dr. Karen Bradley, the House of Delegates, and the House Advisory Committee. At end of that blog, I said, “When we come to the AVMA meeting in 2014, I think things will have changed.” And in January 2014 I wrote a follow-up blog describing how things had changed, much of which has been related to the organization of WVLDI and the promotion of women leaders.

Germinder: *What intrigued you so much that you took it upon yourself to do these interviews [of women leaders]? What was so compelling about this project?*

Smith: There are two aspects of the answer to your question. First is that it was a logical extension of the interviews I had been doing. I have the largest collection of unique, annotated and edited interviews with veterinarians from the 30s and 40s. It’s a precious resource that called for investing much time on each interview than I can no longer do except under special circumstances. What we’re doing from the current interviews is gleaning some of the really important aspects of the information gained and putting it into the whole picture of women’s leadership. So, my responsibility now is applying my expertise as a veterinarian, as a former leader and former dean, into my role as an amateur historian and as a veterinarian interested in history. My associate, Julie, brings an expertise from the professional side of gender studies,
looking at how women are broadly defined in politics and addressing issues associated with the development of women leaders in communities. Thus we are meshing our work with the WVLDI, of which we are a part.

**Germinder:** Ceva is WVLDI’s first industry sponsor. What is the significance of that, and how do you think that will help move the organization forward?

**Smith:** Well, sponsorship, of course, is 95 percent priorities, sharing orientation, ethics, and momentum, and goals that tie into your goals. With that you can have a mutual program, where you see what each brings to the table that keeps moving the momentum forward. Money obviously helps but that’s only five percent of the issue.

**Germinder:** Do you see that with Ceva?

**Smith:** Absolutely. With Ceva, what I see is a chief operating officer who articulates the need for the priorities of having women and other representation in the company for all the right reasons. The fact that there’s $15,000 this year behind it is wonderful, but the greater situation relates to the commitment and the shared goals, shared values.

**Germinder:** What is your aspirational goal for WVLDI in 2014?

**Smith:** I guess my number one aspirational goal is that there will be no need for it to exist in three to four years, which is achievable given the momentum that it has had this past year.

**Germinder:** Some say that women veterinarians coming out of veterinary school do not want to own practices. Is there information out there that validates that point?

**Smith:** Let me give you one piece of information, which is not by any means representative of a study. When I announced to the Cornell veterinary students a course in women’s leadership last spring, and asked interested students to write a short paragraph on why they were expressing interest in the course, a surprising number of the 40 responders stated in different ways, “I want to be a practice owner.” I asked for elaboration so their stories could be shared with class members. My story about that includes quotes and photos of some of the students. The result is that, in my view, there is more interest than there would have been five years ago.

**Germinder:** Is WVLDI an organization to help women become the next leaders in the veterinary profession?

**Smith:** I think that depends on how we set our strategic plan. One issue is in helping students look beyond curing animals and move to adopting the view that we, as veterinarians, look after animals, AND ALSO animals’ relationship with people, with human health. Until we realize that paradigm, we will continue to see a profession of 100,000 people, earning $85,000 a year.
**Germinder:** What do you think are the barriers to women in academia? For example, women wanting to become a dean of a veterinary school, or advance in academia?

**Smith:** We in the profession have been looking at ways to increase the number of women in leadership positions in academia for probably 30 years. We've been somewhat successful, doing it from the standpoint of Affirmative Action. But to succeed we need to look at institutional change that makes it easier to have positions of senior leadership that accommodate the different styles, ways in which women approach issues, time constraints, time issues, and things that bring fulfillment to women.

Adapted from an interview with Dr. Donald F. Smith by Lea-Ann Germinder. Ms. Germinder, in 2000, launched www.goodnewsforpets.com, one of the very first niche portal vet/pet websites. She has provided media relations for the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI). She is PRSA Tri-State District Chair-Elect, Immediate Past-President of the New York chapter of PRSA. She is also a member of the Women President's Organization (WPO), New York Women in Communications, the Publicity Club of New York, the Dog Writers Association of America, the Cat Writer's Association and Vet Partners. She is a recipient of the Women Who Mean Business Award from the Kauffman Foundation/Kansas City Business Journal.

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KEYWORDS:
Lea-Ann Germinder
Good News for Pets
Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative
Julie Kumble
Kelly Report
Karen Bradley
AVMA House of Delegates
Ceva Animal Health

TOPICS:
History of Veterinary Medicine
Women’s Leadership in Veterinary Medicine
Women in Veterinary Medicine
Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative

LEADING QUESTIONS:
How did a male former dean become involved in women’s leadership?

META-SUMMARY:
Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of Cornell’s College of Veterinary Medicine, shares his views on improving women’s leadership in the veterinary profession.

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Ms. Lea-Ann Germinder launched www.goodnewsforpets.com, one of the very first niche portal vet/pet websites in 2000. She has provided media relations for the Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI). She is PRSA Tri-State District Chair-Elect, Immediate Past-President of the New York chapter of PRSA. She is also a member of the Women President’s Organization (WPO), New York Women in Communications, the Publicity Club of New York, the Dog Writers Association of America, the Cat Writer’s Association and Vet Partners. She is a recipient of the Women Who Mean Business Award from the Kauffman Foundation/Kansas City Business Journal.