

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

A Course for Veterinary Students in the History of the Profession

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
November 21, 2014

Five years ago at my home institution (Cornell), I launched an elective course to provide veterinary students with a historical perspective on our profession. I chose the course title, ***Veterinary Medicine, the Versatile Profession***, to signify the scope and variety of changes that have occurred in the role of veterinarians over the past 150 years, and the potential for veterinary students to consider a multitude of career opportunities over their lifetime. The idea of a career spectrum was presented in the context of history, public policy, and people who have shaped the profession; and the course was oriented around three central themes: activity, antinomy, and access.

As the course title suggests, **ACTIVITY** refers to the breadth of career opportunities available to veterinarians. It reflects how the profession changed as opportunities for employment moved from the urban environment when horses were plentiful in the cities, to the rural setting as the land grant culture directed veterinary medical education and practice through much of the 20th century, to the dominant suburban and growing international and environmental opportunities in veterinary medicine that we see today.

ANTINOMY refers to the concept of two competing and apparently irreconcilable principles, each of which seems valid in its own right. An example of antinomy from a theological standpoint would be predestination and free will.

Within veterinary medicine, antinomy is evident in the conflict between theory and practice. These dual concepts, embodied as research and practice, are competing priorities for academia. In the realm of veterinary college organization, I describe the tension between land grant public colleges and private colleges.

The third theme, **ACCESS**, refers to how the profession has determined throughout its history who gets to become a veterinarian. We not only discuss restrictions of certain groups of people at certain periods of times, such as Jewish students or women, but also issues that led to the acceptance of a few African-American students in some northern colleges before Tuskegee Institute (now University) established its veterinary program in the mid-1940s. Examples of individuals who experienced restricted admission policies are provided, often using direct quotes from those interviewed about their experiences related to access.¹

Much of my personal research in the past decade has dealt with the theme of access to a veterinary education, especially as it relates to the anti-Semitism and gender bias that characterized admission policies of many colleges in the early and middle decades of the 20th century. My discussion of this topic was based upon first-person interviews and the historical record at Cornell. Though I have always tried to be sensitive to these issues, students would occasionally be critical of my handling of the topics related to social issues. Some students felt that too much of the course dealt with “social inequalities that have existed in the past.”²

Most students know little about the history of veterinary medicine and are surprised to learn that it began in the cities, and then moved to the country under the aegis of the land grant after urban horses were largely replaced by the internal combustion engine a century ago. Nor do they realize that there were major veterinary colleges in many of the US cities at one time, including Chicago, Boston, New York City and Washington.

When accompanied by first-person stories of veterinarians or family members, history tends to come alive and is more likely to be appreciated and remembered, as one student commented in the end-of course evaluation.³

This course was a fun exploration of the history of veterinary medicine and Cornell, a history that I was totally unaware of. I enjoyed reading through the interviews of Cornell alumni from past generations very much.

Other students commented on the fact that the course is “thought-provoking.”⁴

It opened my eyes to many things going on in our profession ... many things that we talked about were things that I never have thought about looking up on my own. Now that I can see how important many of them are, I know what to be keeping an eye on.

Some students appreciated hearing about how issues affected people of earlier generations, especially now that we are two or three generations removed from some of the biases that severely limited access in earlier decades. I have had several students talk to me outside of class, expressing their gratitude for providing more clarity to some of the challenges that had been prevalent during the lives of their grandparents and great grandparents.

Courses in veterinary history are uncommon in the United States, though I am familiar with a one-credit elective course given at Kansas State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine by Professor Emeritus Howard Erickson. Though Dr. Erickson’s course focuses more on particular aspects of Kansas and the Midwest, as well as the AVMA, and some specific animal diseases, “ironically, [he] covers some of the same topics [as I do] but in different ways.”⁵ Dr. Erickson and I share the hope that courses in veterinary history will be adopted at other colleges, for without understanding our past, how shall we ever hope to understand our present or shape our future?

Veterinary Medicine, the Versatile Profession is valued at 0.5 credits and consists of six 90-minute lectures held in late afternoons in January and February. Though open to students in all four classes, first-year students typically comprise two-thirds of the enrollment. A total of 338 students (average 68 per year) have taken the class since it was launched in 2010. The course is offered either as pass-fail, in which the grade is determined by class attendance and participation, or for a letter grade, in which case students are required to submit a paper based upon a first-person interview with a veterinarian of their choice outside of Cornell University. Some examples of those interviews have been posted on this site.^{6,7,8}

I shall devote several blogs in early 2015 to providing an overview of the lectures comprising the upcoming course. Comments and suggestions will be welcomed.

¹ Smith, Donald F., Faculty Page. Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

² Anonymous comment from a student providing computer-based feedback on the course (2012)

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Erickson, Howard, DVM, PhD (Professor of Physiology, Emeritus, Kansas State University). E-mail communication with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). November 17, 2014.

⁶ Gambino, Stephanie. My Mentor's Amazing Path to the Veterinary Profession. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. February 21, 2014.

⁷ Glass, Aziza N. A Veterinary Student Interviews a Veterinarian Astronaut. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 28, 2014.

⁸ Newsom-Stewart, Elizabeth. A Veterinary Student Interviews Practicing Veterinarians to Help Prepare for Her Career. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. March 20, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Cornell University
Veterinary History
Howard Erickson
Elizabeth Newsom-Stewart
Aziza Glass
Stephanie Gambino
Antinomy
Discrimination
Women in Veterinary Medicine
African-American Veterinarians
Anti-Semitism

TOPIC:

History of Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What veterinary colleges teach formal courses in veterinary history?

META-SUMMARY:

The author provides a general overview of a course in veterinary history.

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.