

Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative Directors Meet at the AVMA, Part II

Editor's Note: This is a continuation of Part 1 of the story that appeared on September 1, 2014.¹

Donald F. Smith

By Julie Kumble
September 2, 2014

On the second day of the AVMA Convention, the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI) board and a few additional members, each of whom have committed substantial amounts of their time to advance the program, met in an all-day strategic planning session facilitated by veterinary consultant, Dr. Karyn Gavzer. Some of the board members were long-time colleagues, but others of us had never met before. It was like meeting pen pals! The group tackled the reality of what we can do as a band of individuals with extremely full lives and what can we accomplish as an initiative with a big, bold goal.



WVLDI Directors and a first-year anniversary cake celebration.

From left to right, Julie Kumble, Rachel Cezar, Valerie Ragan, Doug Aspros, Karen Bradley, Lori Teller, Eleanor Green, Donald Smith and Stacy Pritt. Absent: Bridget Heilsberg, Beth Sabin and Cassandra Tansey.

(Photo provided by AVMA)

We grappled with the very notion of women's leadership vs. leadership in general within the profession. Dr. Valerie Ragan, Director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, articulated the group's sentiment beautifully.²

I feel very strongly that WLVDI should serve to provide women the skills, understandings, and confidence to pursue and be successful in leadership positions of all kinds. By "leadership positions" I mean not only those where they are officially the president or chair of an organization, although obviously that would be ideal, but also developing them into people who successfully lead by "referent power" or as I prefer to say "referent leadership." Referent power is that given by others to people whom they trust and respect. It is referent leadership that elicits maximum cooperation and collaboration and ultimately leads to success. In many cases, I believe that if people have the skills and confidence in themselves to lead in this manner, it is a natural consequence for them to ultimately be in "official" leadership positions, because others will want them there.

Encouraging women, especially young women, to understand the skills they have and to develop additional skills which allow them to have confidence in their abilities is an important first step. It helps them feel comfortable stretching, and it's that willingness to reach forward that we also need to develop. Additionally, creating an understanding of relationships and interactions with others fosters trust and supports the development of referent leaders.

If the goal of WLVDI were to work to place women in leadership positions solely because they are women, I would not be interested in participating. I believe we should be working to ensure the right person is in leadership positions, and ensuring that women have the skills and confidence in themselves to be those leaders and to be successful in that role.



*Bridget Heilsberg, DVM, newest WLVDI board member
and private equine and practitioner in Colorado.
(Photo provided by Dr. Heilsberg)*

At the end of a long day, the group had come up with working committees ranging from programming to outreach to student involvement, as well as a plan to keep moving forward! Dr. Bridget Heilsberg, former Student AVMA president and former Patrol Leader with the US Navy Reserve, and now an equine practitioner in Colorado, was elected as the newest board member.

A one-hour “Hot Topics” session was held on Sunday, led by Drs. Karen Bradley and Stacy Pritt. Their presence, as well as the session title, The Initiative to Develop Women Leaders in Veterinary Medicine, attracted a large, diverse, and enthusiastic group, including Dr. Ted Cohn, incoming AVMA president.



*Dr. Lori Teller, alternate HOD delegate from Texas,
one of four private veterinary practitioners on the WVLDI board member.
(Photo provided by Dr. Teller)*

The session also served as the preamble to Monday’s feature program, a four-hour symposium highlighting a rich array of perspectives and stories from the WVLDI board, and an engaged audience reinforced the energy.

Women’s Leadership Development Symposium

- 8:00 **Women’s Leadership:** Minding the Gap and Sharing Solutions
- 9:00 **Women of Vetlandia:** Secrets to Success in the World of Organized Veterinary Medicine
- 10:00 **Stories from the Trenches:** Leaders from Multiple Areas of Veterinary Medicine Share Experiences and Lessons Learned
- 11:00 **Round Table Wrap Up Q and A:** Healthy Discussion

Some of the nuggets from “Stories from the Trenches” generated appreciative nods. Dr. Rachel Cezar, the USDA APHIS National Horse Protection Coordinator, forged a path in veterinary medicine as she says, against all odds. The first in her family to go to college, her parents didn’t understand or entirely support that becoming a veterinarian would take eight

years. The doubt from them and obstacles she faced were difficult but she used those early challenges to build an infrastructure she would need later.³

I would not have been able to handle the future situations I would encounter being a petite woman of color and wishing to only work with large animals and then take on enforcement of horse welfare for the country.

Dr. Valerie Ragan described a career that has transitioned from a childhood dream of being a private veterinary practitioner, the only type of veterinarian she knew, into a variety of very fulfilling veterinary career pathways. After several years as a small animal practitioner, she found herself searching for new challenges to counter what was becoming to feel routine, yet still loving the profession and wanting to work in the veterinary field. A chance encounter with a brochure on working in the USDA as a field veterinarian was the beginning of a completely unplanned career path, leading to new opportunities in public veterinary practice, both domestically and internationally, that have been extremely rewarding.

On women's leadership, she commented that she realized the value of having a mentor who believed in her and challenged her to stretch into learning and working in new areas in veterinary medicine. As she now works with veterinary students and veterinarians contemplating career transitions, the first piece of advice she gives is "follow your passion." Ask what is it that excites you about not only veterinary medicine, but about life. In asking herself those questions, she finally recognized that she needed continual challenges and new experiences, along with the opportunity to travel and to make a difference in the lives of others.

Dr. Eleanor Green, the Carl King Dean of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University, asserted in her inimitable, amusing and salient style, that professionals at all stages should always be open to following their passion, not just their originally chosen path.⁴

I started my career as a practice owner and mixed animal practitioner in a small rural community (population 300) in Northeast Mississippi, a far cry from my original intent to be an all equine practitioner in the heart of horse country. I am now a veterinary college dean. The explanation is simple, really. The veterinary profession offers a myriad of enlivening professional opportunities, regardless of one's past experiences, interests, preferences, or personal circumstances. Even after a career path is embarked upon, fulfilling prospects will continually present themselves during all phases of one's career - from graduation to retirement. Thus, veterinary medicine entails a lifetime of professional development and constant preparation for new opportunities on the horizon, both planned and unexpected. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "Our lives are defined by opportunities." Leadership development is a crucial part of professional growth. Leaders, in both formal and informal capacities, seem to be sought by others.

Perhaps in five years WVLDI will have achieved its mission and women will be leading the profession in at least equal numbers as men. After just one year as an initiative, with student groups springing up across the country, the profession may just leap ahead in ways we can only imagine.

¹ Kumble, Julie. Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative Directors Meet at the Denver AVMA, Part 1. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. August 27, 2014.

² Ragan, Valerie (Director, Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine, Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine). Email to Julie Kumble (Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts), August 13, 2014.

³ Cezar, Rachel (Horse Protection Coordinator, USDA/APHIS Animal Care, Riverdale, MD). Email to Julie Kumble, August 13, 2014.

⁴ Green, Eleanor (Carl B. King Dean of Veterinary Medicine, Texas A&M University). E-mail to Julie Kumble, August 13, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative
Women in Veterinary Medicine
American Veterinary Medical Association
Eleanor Green
Rachel Cezar
Valerie Ragan
Bridget Heilsburg
Referent leadership

TOPIC:

Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative
Women in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What is the significance of referent leadership?

META-SUMMARY:

The directors of the WVLDI meet for strategic planning session at the AVMA convention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Julie Kumble, MEd. Is Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts.