

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

An Elective Course in the History of Veterinary Medicine

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Is there merit in teaching the history of our profession to veterinary students? A course in veterinary history has been taught at Kansas State University since 2009. This is a popular one-hour elective course open to students in the first three years of the curriculum; however, most are first-year students. Enrollment has been as high as 80 students in 2013, but was 51 students in fall 2014. Iowa State University also recently added a history course, taught by Professor Russ Carrier.

Five years ago, I introduced a one-half credit elective course called, ***Veterinary Medicine: The Versatile Profession*** at Cornell University. Open to students in all four veterinary classes the enrollment averages 60 per year with approximately 80% of the students being from the first-year class. The enrollment this year was 50.

The course has consisted of six 75-minute lectures scheduled during the early evening to allow for maximum flexibility for students, who have other courses during the day. The first lecture provided a brief history of the founding of Cornell University in 1865, and teaching of veterinary medicine and its impact over the last 150 years. Several students commented on the advisability of learning about our home institution. For example, two students wrote in the course evaluation,

This was a very interesting course. I did not know anything about the history of Cornell, or the veterinary profession as a whole. Good opportunity to learn the history of our school.¹

I enjoyed this course a lot. I think it is very helpful to understand how our institution began and where our profession stemmed from and is going towards. This was a wonderful and stimulating course.

The following three lectures gave an overview of veterinary medicine in three historical periods. Lecture II briefly described the European influence, especially from France and Great Britain, then transitioned to North America following the profession from 1860 through the Great Depression. Lectures III and IV continued the history of the profession from World War II to the 1960s, and then the modern era.

The fifth lecture was topical, focused on One Health with emphasis on zoonotic diseases, comparative medicine and zoonosis. For the final lecture, I offered the students an opportunity

to determine the topic of their choice, and the overwhelming majority chose stories from interesting veterinarians from Cornell and elsewhere.

The course was very well-received with an overall score being 4.81 on a scale of 1-5. Seventy-nine percent of the students rated the course “excellent” and the remainder “very good”

Comments included:

This was a fantastic overview of the history surrounding veterinary medicine.

Gives a good perspective on how the profession evolved and continues to grow.

Amazing class! I think it should be taken by every student.

I always looked forward to this class, it was so interesting.

Some students commented that it was a nice change from the normal routine of science-based courses.

AWESOME. So much fun, educational, point out the real life perspectives we need to be thinking about, not just about memorizing and regurgitating material during the elective (Distribution) period.

No matter how worn down I felt, this course always lifted my spirits! I loved the larger perspective on our profession that it offered.

Over half of the students (57.1%) “strongly agreed” that “the course was relevant to their education,” and an additional 21.4% “agreed” with the statement. Not all students were as enthusiastic, however, as one opined,

I just wish I was more interested in the history of veterinary medicine. It's not a very compelling topic unfortunately.

In broad terms, the goals of the course were to help the students understand how the veterinary profession has changed over the years, and that it has survived and flourished despite changes in species priorities and societal impact (hence the term, versatile). All of the students (100% of respondents) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the course objectives were clearly stated.

Amy Molitoris, a first-year student, was more specific in describing her personal interest in the course,²

I have always enjoyed learning about history, and I was ecstatic to participate in a class that focused on the past, present, and future of veterinary medicine. Prior to

taking this course, the graduating classes of the past were simply names and faces to me. Now as I observe the class photos³ I see people who changed the course of veterinary medicine. Perhaps most thrilling to me, however, is when I see people at conferences and symposia whom I learned about in class. I find it easy to start a conversation with these veterinarians since I have some knowledge of their work.

Throughout the course, I challenged the students to consider the impact of access to a veterinary education, emphasizing periods in our history when there were restrictions on enrollment based upon gender, racial, ethnic, religious and geographic barriers.

I also emphasized the impact of the agriculturally-based land grant priorities versus comparative medicine-based priorities in determining location of veterinary colleges. This naturally led into discussions about the future, including the siting of new veterinary colleges, anticipated opportunities for veterinary education at the DVM and postgraduate levels, and priorities of the practice of veterinary medicine in meeting future societal needs.

The grading for the course was either pass-fail based upon class attendance (about 15% of the students chose this option), or letter grade. The latter was based upon completion of an assignment in which the students were asked to report on an interview of a veterinarian of their choosing. The results of these interviews will be presented in a future post.

¹ This, and all other data and quotations are taken from the end-of-course confidential computer-based course evaluation that is accessible to all students. As of this posting, 30 of the 50 students had completed the course evaluations (60% return).

² Molitoris, Amy (DVM Class of 2018), email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), March 27, 2015.

³ Composite photos of the Cornell classes from the late 19th century to the present are hung on a wall prominently visible to all veterinary students and employees.

KEYWORDS:

History of veterinary medicine
Cornell University
Kansas State University
Iowa State University
Veterinary Curriculum

TOPIC:

History of Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What colleges teach courses in veterinary history?

META-SUMMARY:

The instructor in a course in veterinary history describes the outcomes of this year's course.

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.