

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Julie Adamchick: The Making of a Production Animal Veterinarian

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, based upon written and verbal communication with Dr. Adamchick.
May 23, 2014

Though she grew up on a 120-cow dairy,¹ Julie Adamchick initially had no intention of becoming a dairy farmer or a veterinarian. When she entered college in 2005,² her real interest was in international development and public health. Her aspirations evolved during her undergraduate years, however, and after receiving her DVM degree from Cornell on May 25, Dr. Adamchick will begin working as a production animal veterinarian on a dairy in Minnesota.



*Dr. Julie Adamchick with her husband, Matthew, a mechanical engineer
(Photo provided by Dr. Adamchick, 2014)*

As an undergraduate, Julie decided to pursue veterinary medicine to gain a tangible skill set and knowledge base. Her aspirations were to learn about livestock health so she could apply it to small scale agriculture in less developed settings. “Veterinary medicine,” she rationalized, “would be my ticket to travel and to apply my resources and opportunities to improve the lives of people without access to those same opportunities.”³

With exposure to Cornell’s educational and infrastructure resources and extensive production animal health networks, Julie’s focus during veterinary college gravitated towards food production and consumption, and the systems and people involved in animal agriculture. Food safety piqued her interest during a first-year lecture by Dr. Martin Wiedmann,⁴ a veterinarian and food safety researcher in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, when he talked about the risks associated with consumption of raw milk and the need to communicate those risks to

the public.

It hit close to home, as I am both the veterinarian advocating for pasteurization and safe practices, as well as the farm kid who grew up drinking milk directly from the bulk tank; and at the same time living in all-natural Ithaca with friends who literally buy raw milk at night from the so-called milk black market. In the US we have the luxury of making these choices, even when the decisions are poorly informed, but in many countries around the globe, such choices are not as convenient, nor even possible. Regardless whether wealthy or poor, food is the center of health or illness as well as culture, economics, and politics.

It is this universal, permeating relevance of food production, coupled with the intricate relationship that we have with the animals we both love and love to eat that keeps me fascinated with the fields of food animal medicine and food production.

Dr. Adamchick recognizes that, while it has become trendy, and even profitable, to talk ad nauseam of the *challenges of feeding the world in 2050*, it is true that the decades ahead of us will be unprecedented in how we will stretch our resources for that driving force of food. She acknowledges that food systems are not just a source of nutrition, but are intimately linked with issues of climate change, population growth, urbanization, globalization, civil wars, religion, biodiversity, as well as simply getting along with our neighbors.

As a veterinarian, I am trained to maintain and improve the health of the animals, the safety of the food, and the dynamics of the relationships between animals and people. As an epidemiologist (my future goal), I will be equipped to ask and to answer questions about how that food is produced, what impact it has on the people who produce and consume it, and to have some grasp of the costs and externalities involved. Regardless of the scale, that is exciting.

Adamchick's evolution to this line of reasoning developed gradually. During the summer after her first year in veterinary college, she worked at a veterinary clinic in central New York that serviced dairy farms ranging from very small (15 cows) to very large (over 1,500). Though she learned a great deal about medicine and animal health, her personal epiphany was realizing how much she truly enjoyed working with dairy farmers.

Cows, yes. Business and management and herd health decisions, yes. But the singular sense of community with the dairymen (and women) built on respect for their work, their values, and the intricacies of the decisions they make daily.



Julie Adamchick, DVM, in Columbia following her second year of veterinary college
(Photo provided by Dr. Adamchick, 2014)

The following summer, she received funding through a Cornell program called Expanding Horizons, and lived on several dairy farms in Colombia.⁵ She again realized how *at home* she was working within the dairy community regardless of the setting, and even when in another country, speaking another language. She was becoming aware that home to her was not a geographic location, but the dairy community itself, and that there were many opportunities to work within that framework without abandoning her initial goals or idealism.

In her third year of veterinary college, as her experiential and academic perspectives continued to evolve, Dr. Adamchick found herself becoming increasingly committed to preventative medicine and population-level analysis, what she considered staples of production animal medicine. While she certainly enjoyed relationships with individual clients and patients, her work was ultimately most satisfying when it involved uncovering and addressing the root of a problem.

Through exposure to applied research projects, Julie recognized the power of gathering information about a population to enable better decision-making that ultimately impacts the life of the individual. Through distribution (elective) classes and faculty mentoring, she perceived the potential usefulness of epidemiology and got a taste for the power of statistical analysis and study design when applied appropriately. These are skills that she became determined to learn and use in the future.

By the beginning of Julie's fourth year, she realized that she wanted to work with livestock and the people who work with livestock, but that she did not want to be a dairy practitioner throughout her career. She aspired to begin as a food animal veterinarian, preferably dairy,

then in a few years, seek advanced education in either a MPVM program (Master of Preventive Medicine), or a PhD. Ultimately, she thought she would be using her skills in an applied research setting such as a university, private practice, government, or an NGO context.

After looking at opportunities in several private practice jobs from the northeast to Texas, and even New Zealand, and also considering an academic internship, Dr. Adamchick accepted a job in late March as a farm veterinarian for a large dairy operation in Minnesota. Though it means missing out on the relationships and the road time of traditional ambulatory practice, an attractive aspect of working for a single dairy is that she is hired to be the farm's expert on animal health, and that her suggestions will be taken as serious management recommendations. The focus is on preventative health management, rather than reacting to disease after it has occurred.

She will be working directly under the herd veterinarian and will primarily be responsible for herd checks, sick and fresh cow work, and training Spanish-speaking employees.

The owners are businessmen before dairymen, and this means that they rely on and trust their veterinarians to make the animal health decisions. I have no doubt that I will learn not only clinical skills and veterinary medicine under their head veterinarian, but also insight into the decision-making process that makes these dairies run.

Like all new graduates, Adamchick considers what constitutes the ideal new employee.

We are always told that attitude and work ethic trump entry level clinical skills. I think that a strong background in dairy (comfort around the facilities, the animals, and the people) and the ability to speak Spanish have been attributes in my favor more than my ability or lack thereof to diagnose early pregnancies or perform a caesarian operation right out of college.

There continues to be concern in many quarters about the future of the veterinary workforce in many areas, including the food animal sector. Even so, Dr. Adamchick remains optimistic about what the future holds.

I have no crystal ball and my excitement, frankly, stems from the fact that we don't know what innovative systems of technology, infrastructure, and ways of thinking are going to be used in animal agriculture three decades from now. But consider that as recently as 30 years ago, hardly anyone owned a PC! Certainly it is possible that veterinary practice as we know it today may be scrambling for relevance if individuals or the industry as a whole does not adapt well. However the industry unfolds, I am confident that veterinarians will be involved somewhere along the way, keeping animals and people healthy. I want to be a part of that, and I think I will find a way to do so!

¹ Dr. Adamchick grew up in Montgomery County, New York, about 50 miles northwest of Albany.

² Dr. Adamchick received her BS in 2009 from Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

³ Adamchick, Julie (DVM, Cornell University 2014), emails to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), May 14, 2014.

The numerous quotes and the story throughout are from this correspondence and subsequent meeting on May 21.

⁴ Weidmann, Martin, Dr Med Vet, PhD, Professor of Food Sciences, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University.

⁵ [Expanding Horizons](#) provides veterinary students at Cornell opportunities to familiarize themselves with issues surrounding veterinary medicine in developing countries.

KEYWORDS:

Julie Adamchick
Cornell University
Bovine Practice
Food Animal Practice
Production Animal Practice
Animal Agriculture
One Health

TOPIC:

Bovine Practice
Careers in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What are the education and experiential requirements on the pathway to becoming a production animal veterinarian?

META-SUMMARY:

A graduating DVM student from Cornell University explains how she became interested in production animal medicine.

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.