

AVMA Workforce Study
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The American Veterinary Medical Association's highly anticipated "2013 U.S. Veterinary Workforce Study: Modeling Capacity Utilization" is an important step among many taken in recent years to help the veterinary medical profession reach a more appropriate state of economic equilibrium. We commend the AVMA for commissioning this study, which is a very useful and important achievement for the profession.

As a data-driven organization, the AAVMC appreciates the value of a study that brings rigor and evidence to a dialogue sometimes based upon supposition and misperception. It challenges us to ask the question "how do we proceed from here?"

The study describes an existing excess-capacity of 12.5 percent profession-wide, and confirms variances across geographic regions and professional sectors. For example, the study cites a current excess-capacity of 18% in small animal practice, yet found relative balance in public health, food safety, research and regulatory affairs.

Most in our profession realize that the present state of affairs has been a long time coming. Over the past 25 years, studies ranging from the Pew Report to KPMG have been undertaken to help our profession rise above the market characteristics and conditions behind our persistent economic problems.

These factors have to do with the way society pays for human-quality care for companion animals, the dynamics of internet commerce, changes in agricultural

production practices, the high cost of medical education, and others. Despite these challenges, our profession has coped well. But when the Great Recession hit, those “sub-clinical” problems festered into something more ominous.

The ensuing economic shock substantially reduced consumer demand for many services, including veterinary ones. As millions lost their jobs and many their homes, they also lost their ability to pay for clinical care for their companion animals, particularly preventive care. Fortunately, signs of economic progress are abundant in the national economy: jobless rates are dropping, financial markets are climbing, and housing is coming back. We can all agree that this bodes well for our profession.

Periodic imbalances in our profession and others have occurred before and will occur again. Many thought veterinary medicine was doomed when the car replaced the horse for draft and transportation. Dentistry also went through a period of imbalance following the mass introduction of fluoride into the nation’s public water supplies. Between 1986 and 2001, seven private dental schools closed. As is the case with our own profession, no overarching “authority” existed to mandate school closures or class reductions. Decisions to change or close were made by autonomous institutions based on individual financial circumstances. It is interesting to note that 10 dental schools opened between 1997 and 2013.

Each of our member institutions is responsible for its own enrollment based on its mission and the needs of each school’s region and state. A half-dozen years ago there was a great deal of discussion in the profession about an impending under-capacity, especially in public health related areas of veterinary medicine. That was one

of the reasons there was such widespread support for the federal “Veterinary Workforce Expansion Act of 2005.” Any class enlargements we see today are the result of action taken then to respond to that need. It takes time to gain funding, build physical plants, and recruit faculty.

This study documents some fundamental problems. But it didn’t take this study to know that salaries are too low and educational debt is unacceptably high. The economic challenges facing our colleges of veterinary medicine and our students are not unique; they are systemic throughout higher education. Our nation needs to reexamine how it funds its colleges and universities; it’s a much bigger issue than just academic veterinary medicine.

The study begs the question: “How should our schools and colleges of veterinary medicine respond?” We view academic veterinary medicine and the nation’s practice environment as fully integrated, constantly interacting and co-dependent systems. As such we shoulder the burdens --and the triumphs --of this profession together.

During the months ahead, the members of the AAVMC will carefully consider this report and its implications. We will continue to develop new programs that address the economic wellbeing of the profession, engage in constructive dialogue with the organized veterinary medical community, and do all we can to create positive change.

Despite our challenges, we should remember those who possess veterinary medical degrees are uniquely equipped to tackle some of society’s most pressing problems. There is growing recognition that the academic rigor and comparative nature of a DVM degree, spanning multiple species, brings value and application across a broad

spectrum of technical, scientific and medical careers, including homeland security, public health, disease detection and prevention, research, and protecting the safety of our nation's food supply. We must continue to encourage, recruit, and educate the best students. And America's love affair with the family pet is not over.

We believe that market forces are the ultimate determinants of capacity and demand in an economic system. We understand that periods of stress and friction are not unusual as professions work through supply and demand cycles. We welcome this study's valuable perspective and the resolve for improvement it should elicit in all of us. Our overarching goal is to make sure our efforts to prepare new generations of veterinarians remain in strategic alignment with the needs and expectations of the society we serve.