

## VIN Solutions to the Profession Essay Contest

### Third Place Winner

#### The Leadership Gap

by Alexandra Ripperger

One long, narrow hallway in the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center holds the picture of each student in every graduating class at the College of Veterinary Medicine. Moving down the display, a curious phenomenon becomes apparent. The first class composite, from 1951, contains all men. By 1987, in conjunction with national trends, the class is split 50:50 male to female. When my class of 2018 graduates, our composite will contain the images of 86 women and 12 men.

According to AVMA statistics, 58% of veterinarians in the United States are female<sup>1</sup>; that number will climb should the gender breakdown of veterinary students continue to hover at 75% female and 25% male.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the various leadership institutions surrounding the profession have not kept up with the sweeping female tide. The lack of women in leadership is a disturbing issue that affects nearly every line of work in our country, but it is particularly toxic problem for a profession becoming more feminized each year. Unless veterinary students are empowered with knowledge and mentorship to combat the numerous barriers creating the leadership gap, the veterinary profession will be unable to keep pace with the changing demands of its (overwhelming female) members.

A lack of women in positions of power permeates every aspect of veterinary medicine. To begin with the AVMA, three of the nine AVMA officers are women. Four of the 15 voting members of the Board of Directors are women. 30% of the members of the House of Delegates are women. In academia, only six of 30 veterinary schools have a female dean and women make up only about 25% of tenured veterinary school professors.<sup>3</sup> Most abysmal may be the gender statistics regarding veterinary industry. To use three examples, Nestle (who owns Purina) has one woman and 14 men on its executive team.<sup>4</sup> Zoetis has four women (out of ten people) on its executive team and only one woman on its board of directors.<sup>5</sup> The Elanco leadership team is 15 people, and only two of those are female.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to imagine how our profession will tackle the unique issues stemming from a female-dominated workforce, if women are not proportionally represented in the offices deciding the future of veterinary medicine.

Veterinarians and their collaborators studying leadership gap factors break down the influences into four components: systemic, economic, cultural and psychological. One systemic barrier example is a lack of term limits for the AVMA House of Delegates. At the 2014 AVMA convention, the House of Delegates struck down a bid to limit volunteers to four-year terms, with the ability to serve no more than two terms. As VIN News noted, “the term limits were meant to attract new blood to the policymaking process given that some delegates have served for decades.”<sup>7</sup> If delegates are able to hold their position for as long as they desire, then it might be expected the HOD could have trouble reflecting a changing gender demographic and comprehending the modern concerns of the profession.

Financial pressures are another factor eliminating women from positions of power. According to the 2013 AVMA Veterinary Economics Report, “...median professional income among male veterinarian owners ranged from \$110,000 for food animal predominant to \$150,000 for companion animal exclusive practitioners...female veterinarian owners ranged from \$60,045 for mixed animal practitioners to \$100,000 for companion animal...”<sup>8</sup> In addition, the 2015 report reveals, “overall, male veterinarians earned an average of \$62.92 per hour compared to \$49.65 earned by females.”<sup>9</sup> (The report found no significant difference in hours worked). Earning a substantially lower salary constrains female veterinarians from feeling financially secure enough to take time off to pursue leadership opportunities.

The numerous cultural and psychological patriarchal hurdles all women face in the United States are, of course, also prevalent in veterinary medicine. Stereotyping women as passive, less ambitious, and more family-focused than their male colleagues bestows fewer offers to female veterinarians to participate in leadership roles. Additionally, wariness against less linear career paths (as a majority of women must take

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Statistics/Pages/Market-research-statistics-US-veterinarians.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/100215g.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/141001h.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nestle.com/aboutus/management/executivecommittee>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.zoetis.com/about-us/executive-team/index.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.elanco.com/about/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.vin.com/vinnews.aspx?articleId=33003>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/130401e.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/docs/librariesprovider16/Docs-Counseling/2015-avma-report-on-verinary-compensation.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

time off to start families) enforces harsher standards on women applying for higher-level positions. Finally, the lack of female role models contributes to psychological impediments leading younger women to believe leadership roles are unattainable.

Although term limits for members of the AVMA House of Delegates would be an excellent step towards adding more women to veterinary leadership, the recent strike down suggests a small change made from the bottom up may be a more reasonable goal. Until I attended the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative conference at my university and did research for this essay, I had no knowledge of the AVMA leadership positions or how any of the seats were filled. I propose that once a year, at least one board member or delegate visit each veterinary school to educate students on national veterinary leadership. A simple hour-long session would enlighten students to the possibilities for continued active leadership in veterinary medicine once school ends. Secondly, the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative should hold a half-day workshop at each veterinary school. Discussions on the leadership gap and other concerns will empower students with knowledge on overcoming systemic, economic, and cultural barriers. Importantly, bringing both AVMA leaders and the WVLDI to schools can equip female students with mentors and guidance to confront gender bias and overcome leadership roadblocks.

The leadership gap for women is a universal phenomenon, but veterinary medicine must be a chief architect in bridging the chasm. It is absolutely crucial that women in veterinary medicine are not shut out of positions of authority; the health of our profession depends upon collaborative efforts to make being a veterinarian, and a veterinary leader, an reachable and desirable goal for ambitious, brilliant, compassionate women. By providing students with gender gap knowledge and opportunities for mentorship, the AVMA will strategically build a profession working towards achieving equality and empowerment.

### About Alexandra Ripperger



Alexandra Ripperger is a soon-to-be fourth year vet student at the University of Minnesota. She enjoys working with small animals, pocket pets, and small ruminants/camelids, and her goal is to own a practice one day. When not studying, Alex enjoys playing volleyball, reading, and traveling.