

**Retiring James Herriot**  
*A proposal for modern veterinary education*

*By Ilene Ellis*



I blame James Herriot.

Mr. James Alfred Wright, M.R.C.V.S., better known by his pen name, began veterinary practice amongst the pastoral hills of Yorkshire, England, in 1940. He authored his memoirs twenty years later, and the perception of what constitutes my chosen profession has forever since been cemented in the minds of the public.

When examining modern veterinary education, that bucolic image is still the standard to which we are trained—we are molded to become a “Jack of all trades, master of none,” caregiver to all creatures, be they great or small. Despite the growing disinterest in mixed animal practice, veterinary colleges insist that each of their students be proficient practitioners in all species of animals.

Allergy sufferers sniffle their way through feline exams during rotations.

Hippophobic students nervously auscultate the campus equine herd.

Masked asthmatics enter poultry houses for routine cloacal swabbing.

We are told it's for our own good, that we should be skilled in all walks of animal life just in case we change our preferences once out in the trenches. Outliers aside, I would wager that most incoming veterinary students know what sort of patients they envision seeing in the future. After all, we had four years of undergraduate education to pinpoint our interests. We engaged in countless hours of volunteering, shadowing, and working in many areas of the veterinary profession to be accepted into our programs.

In truth, veterinary students are a pretty focused lot.

After recognizing this, some colleges decided to adopt “tracking,” an academic invention designed to expose students to elective coursework specific to their intended field aspirations. With tracking, hypothetical future Smithfield employees can engage in coursework that develops them into swine experts. Holstein enthusiasts are granted access to more tail veins, allowing them to perfect their bovine venipuncture techniques prior to donning their muck boots and heading out to farm calls.

In short, tracking allows for a more focused education.

Unfortunately, these opportunities are piled on top of the excessive load of coursework already demanded of students. In result, overwhelmed freshmen and sophomores, neck deep in anatomy and pathology, often decline the optional classes to prevent further stress and burnout. Tracking is most beneficial in the final years of veterinary education, when the pan-species core curriculum finally yields to an individual's chosen field preferences, but three years pass before they are given this chance.

Is this model effective? Efficient? Is our education fitted to our needs, or has it been tailored to increase our odds at passing the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination?

Has veterinary education befallen the “teach to the test” trap?

I am extremely fortunate to be enrolled at the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine, where we have a dean and staff committed to creating a curriculum that is best suited to the needs of the modern veterinarian while also affording us earlier opportunities within our intended field. I recently completed two weeklong seminars during our “selectives,” low stakes Pass/Fail courses of our choosing. This feature of my education allows for a breath of individuality prior to my final semesters, allowing me to engage in my area of interest without the burden of additional coursework competing for my attention.

However, like all other veterinary schools, my college's primary objective is for each of its students to graduate and become veterinarians, and the final hurdle in that procession is the successful completion of



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the NAVLE. Per the examination's website, the test encompasses "all animal species commonly seen by entry level practicing veterinarians;" therefore, NCSU along with all the other AVMA accredited institutions have no choice but to design the bulk of their core curriculum in a broad, shotgun approach.

The best option available to me is to glean what I can from my subjects and fill in the gaps via supplemental opportunities like selectives and externships. I have no doubts that my institution will prepare me to be an adequate practitioner within my chosen field, and perhaps with my additional experiences I'll feel skilled enough to bypass an internship and enter private practice as a first-year veterinarian.

But, shouldn't that be the goal? Why should I not be prepped to be knowledgeable and confident enough to bypass a year of working long shifts at half wages immediately following my graduation?

Is "adequate" the standard to which a veterinary student should be held?

Are students being trained to be acceptable and not exemplary?

We can blame James Herriot, or the powers that be can do the sensible thing and revise the NAVLE into field focused exams. Instead of licensing us for *all*, we should have the option to practice on *some*.

My proposed solution is simple—create two paths to a DVM. The first would consist of the current model of four years of pan-species study. The second would be streamlined—a three-year program focused on the specific field of veterinary medicine desired by the student. Following one introductory year of generalized topics, the curriculum would diverge. At that point, for example, the equine focused would no longer waste tuition dollars learning how to neuter cats—that time would be allocated to studying the glossed over areas of farrier work, nutrition, reproduction, and ambulatory practice design. The third year would be filled with field specific rotations in research, advanced surgery, and mentored practice. Anyone choosing this path would do so with the understanding that they would only be allowed to sit a focused licensing exam, with the option of guaranteed readmission should they seek a change in the future.

Of course, such a curriculum shift would require drastic changes. Schools would need reorganization and develop flexibility to adapt to shifts in desired focus trends. The NAVLE would have to undergo reconstruction and the AVMA would have to be willing to license area specific veterinarians. Considering that it works just fine in the realms of human medicine, I don't see why it couldn't work in the veterinary world.

After all, it isn't 1940 anymore.