

A Perfect Education

By Allison Hale



I rest my chin wearily on my hand and stare at the computer screen. “Harley, a ten-year-old spayed female Australian Shepherd, presented to. . .” the words blur, and I rub my eyes. It is 10:00 pm and I am still at the teaching hospital trying to finish my paperwork. Unfortunately, it is paperwork I can’t do at home because I need too much information from the patient file. I have been in the hospital for 16 straight hours with numerous patients. I haven’t seen the light of day. I am hungry. Morale drops.

Every veterinary student has a day like the one above. Perhaps several days, or weeks. Maybe a month or two. Even when these days are rewarding, they are exhausting. Many of us begin to question why we went to veterinary school in the beginning. Why did we study for years for this? Did I make the right decision? Is my time and money being used wisely? The short answer is no, not always. There are ways in which the educational system could be improved, and efficient is rarely a word I would use to describe a university. However,

each veterinary student class is a cohort of individuals with differing opinions and thoughts on what they consider valuable or worth their time. As Aesop’s Fables tell us, it is impossible to please everyone. Perhaps in a few small ways, though, we could please the majority.

As a senior reflecting on the past four years of my veterinary education, I think my university had notable teaching successes. Particularly in third year, faculty strove to provide a clinical perspective to their lectures. They provided case examples and shared tricks they had learned through years of practice. During the first and second years of veterinary school, I was not as impressed. It was noted back in 2007 by Arens and Sischo that there are courses in the pre-clinical curriculum at every university that remediate prerequisite information, resulting in redundancy and inefficiency that consumes valuable space in the curriculum.¹ I think that first and second year classes could be condensed via the exclusion of repeated prerequisite information into 1.5 years of coursework. The remaining semester could be added to clinical rotations to make the final clinical year 1.5 years long. A second option for the extra semester could be the addition of practical skills-based classes into the first two years that would break up the monotony of lectures. These classes could include fundamental skills such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation, catheter placement and fluid pump management, bandaging, wound care, etc. Introducing these skills early in the veterinary curriculum would have multiple benefits. It would allow students a break from lecture-based classroom time and thus benefit mental health. It would equip students for more opportunities during summer experiences in the first two years of veterinary school. Finally, it would create more prepared and clinically efficient students entering their final year of veterinary school.

My program did a commendable job of balancing a broad but also focused education. The Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges coordinates the activity of veterinary schools across the US and states the following as its mission: “to improve the quality of life for people and animals by advancing veterinary medical education, improving animal health and welfare, strengthening biomedical research, promoting food safety and food security, and enhancing environmental quality.”¹ That is a tall order. With technological and research developments, the field of veterinary medicine is becoming more detailed and specialized. Therefore, it becomes increasingly hard to offer a veterinary education that addresses the current knowledge base. As a non-tracking school, my university needed to provide all students with practical knowledge about the majority of species and specialties. Other than a dearth of poultry information, I think my university succeeded in providing a diverse knowledge base through core classes.

Returning to the opening picture of a veterinary student drowning in paperwork, I believe that the clinical year at my university could afford improvement. Although the medical record is an important aspect of veterinary care, and writing SOAPS can provide a thorough analysis of a case, if my paperwork receives no feedback, I am not learning. On the contrary, I could be continuing in an entirely wrong understanding of a critical concept without knowing it. My university could improve by providing written feedback or verbal discussion of SOAPS and discharge instructions. One rotation of note at my university does address this issue. In this rotation, detailed SOAPS are mandatory until the clinician is convinced that the student has the ability to logically work through a case. Along the way, each SOAP is returned to the student with constructive comments. After the clinician is satisfied with the student’s clinical thinking, students can SOAP particularly interesting cases and receive feedback but are not required to do so. This relieves the



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stress of SOAPing but still provides learning opportunities. Adopting this policy across the remainder of the teaching hospital would facilitate more effective learning.

It can be easy for fourth year veterinary students to become restless and bitter. We are exhausted from years of stress, anxious to spread our wings in the real world, and desperate for life outside of school. Complaining comes easily. However, complaining is rarely helpful or stress-relieving. I think my university could improve its education by fostering an attitude of teamwork and team encouragement rather than team complaining. This starts with individuals, and positive attitudes can be as contagious as negative ones.

No veterinary school is perfect. No veterinary student will enjoy their educational experience every day. However, by striving to improve both the educational system and our attitudes toward it, we can create a more perfect veterinary education.

References:

1. Arens, Amanda & Sischo, William. (2007). Addressing Educational Challenges in Veterinary Medicine through the use of Distance Education. *Journal of veterinary medical education*. 34. 279-85. 10.3138/jvme.34.3.279.