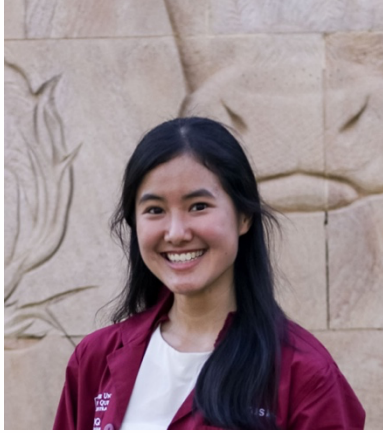


Putting the vet in diversity: A proposal for diversifying the veterinary profession

By Hannah Lee



In 2017, I was faced with my first set of 'diversity challenges' as a first-year veterinary student. Fipronil was prescribed for cats and dogs but could intoxicate rabbits. A heart rate of 150 screamed tachycardia in a greyhound but bradycardia in a bird. Horses threw the anatomy rule book followed by most other mammals out the window. There were too many species, too many differences.

The problem with our profession, I thought, was that we were too diverse.

But 4 years on, as a final-year student, I realize that the diversity of our patients do not reflect the diversity of us as veterinarians. Veterinary medicine has been said to be the least ethnically and racially diverse profession in the United States¹, and this is not dissimilar to other parts of the world. In the UK, close to 94% of veterinarians are white², and indigenous people made up less than 1% of workers in the Australian veterinary industry³.

The problem with our profession, I now think, is that we are not diverse enough.

This is a problem not merely for the sake of an equity argument, or because it is a politically correct consideration. Having a diverse representation of workers leads to better research, as research programs are influenced by the backgrounds of researchers⁴. Thus, the limited diversity in our profession limits both the understanding and use of veterinary medicine⁵. Not only that, but the range of patient care is also limited, as people of minority ethnic groups are more likely to serve in minority communities compared to non-minorities⁶ and are more able to anticipate their needs⁴.

Imagine a world where research thrived because of the sheer diversity of the researchers, a world where solutions became more creative and innovative because of the increased number of perspectives brought to the table, and a world where minority communities had a permanent veterinary presence instead of the occasional animal health program run by a far-off university. It seems a world too good to be true, because we are not yet a world where diversity is seen as an essential element to success.

The solution to this challenge calls for more than a few scholarship handouts or increasing the quota of minority students in universities. AAVMC data from the 2020 report revealed that the percentage of underrepresented applicants into veterinary school were roughly similar to the percentage of underrepresented students enrolled⁷, and I believe that this statistic is a strong enough argument to focus the solution at diversifying the applicant pool itself, rather than merely encouraging universities to admit students of minority ethnicities. Hence, I am proposing a three-pronged approach, tackling the issues of minority student recruitment, student barriers, and public awareness.

Firstly, the issue of recruitment. A study showed that minority students were the least likely to be interested in a veterinary career⁸, and most are not even aware that it is a viable or desirable career choice to pursue. As the two most important factors when it came to a minority student deciding to pursue a career in veterinary medicine were an acquaintance with a veterinarian and an opportunity to shadow one¹, I propose establishing groups of veterinarians who volunteer to give talks at the high schools in minority communities. The students would be educated on the role and necessity of veterinarians in the community with regards to animal care, food safety, and biosecurity, and interested students would be offered a chance to shadow these veterinarians in practice. If time and funding permits, a mentorship program can also be set up between these veterinarians and interested students.

However, interest alone is not enough for students to enrol in veterinary school, and we have to acknowledge the educational and financial barriers standing in the way of most minority students. My proposed solution is this – we create a system to identify potentially gifted candidates with an interest in veterinary medicine from schools in minority communities and offer them either financial support to attend better schools or a mentorship program to help them through the academic requirements of and application to vet school. While I understand that 'providing scholarships to all gifted students' is a solution

much easier said than done, I think diversifying the veterinary population is not a priority in many universities, and a change in those priorities could potentially lead to an increase in the channelling of funds towards this cause, as recognition of a need leads to urgency in action.

This brings me to the last prong of my approach. Though some countries have understood the far-reaching implications of increasing diversity in the industry, plans toward diversifying the profession in other countries range from inchoate to desultory. Governing bodies and potential sponsors should be educated, be it through campaigns or written proposals, on the vast benefits of diversity in the profession. Universities should be shown that diversifying the profession need not mean compromising the academic integrity of the program by simply increasing the quota of minority students but rather involves investing into lives of deserving students of differing racial, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Veterinarians and the public need to realize that most underrepresented students select career opportunities that allow them to avoid discrimination⁹, thus it rests on us to build a workforce that is accepting and encouraging of diversity. Ideally, these efforts would result in increased funding toward projects to increase diversity, better prioritizing in terms of the way said funds are allocated, and an overall increase in the profession's acceptance of diversity.

It's 2021, and it's about time we stopped associating diversity with problems and start equating it with potential.

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