

Labor Shortages in Veterinary Medicine

by Ian Doody



Labor shortages have become the post-pandemic norm with business owners across all sectors unable to find adequate staff to keep their businesses open and running efficiently. Unfortunately, for the veterinary medical field this is not a new problem but rather one that has long plagued it and caused animal suffering as a result (both with inexperienced and inadequate staffing, and inability to take cases). I believe that this shortage is multifactorial but at its core is driven by a combination of overuse and inadequate compensation for both doctors and skilled technicians.

A 2018 AAHA survey examining the turnover rates of veterinary staff found a 23% turnover rate of credentialed veterinary technicians, while during the same period the national average across all disciplines was just 15%.¹ The primary problems that have been cited to explain this high turnover rate include low pay, burnout/poor utilization of skills, and lack of respect/self-actualization. The poor pay seems to be the most significant factor both for doctors and their support staff (relative to what they could be making in equivalent roles in human medicine). Importantly, human medicine, while being overpriced and poorly organized in many aspects, has to be the benchmark for the veterinary profession because it represents the opportunity cost that these employees are taking to work in the animal health field. The 2020 Bureau of Labor Statistics census found that the average credentialed veterinary technician made just \$36,260 per year, while their counterparts in human medicine serving in equivalent capacities made an average of \$45,620 per year.²

However, it is difficult to determine the true human equivalent to a CVT/LVT because there are many different designations in the human field (RN, BSN, LPN, etc.) whose average salaries range from \$45,620 to \$77,600 per year depending on the level of nursing license obtained (LPN vs RN respectively). This lower pay relative to contemporaries in human medicine is mirrored at all levels of veterinary medicine (doctors included) and makes it more difficult to pay loans that are equivalent to those of human medical education (whether nursing or MD level). This leads to loss of veterinary staffing to more lucrative endeavors in adjacent fields.

Poor utilization and lack of self-actualization/respect have also been major problems highlighted by veterinary staff as contributors to high turnover rates. Many of these skilled employees feel like “glorified pet holders” because they are not given a chance to get involved and utilize the information that they went to school for; in fact, most people don’t even know that credentialed technicians [have an education and certification process similar to that of human nurses].³ It is easy to imagine then how resentment and dissatisfaction can brew amongst the veterinary staff and lead to high attrition which compromises patient care and the ability to meet demand.

The impact of this staffing shortage on the veterinarian is profound. High turnover and labor shortages makes it difficult to maintain a skilled, competent, and efficient staff that knows how to work together to achieve the best patient outcomes possible. Young doctors in particular need a skilled and efficient staff, so they can focus on their medicine and surgery skills. Additionally, we as doctors can only see as many patients in a shift as our support staff allows, so having a lower staff turnover rate means we can make more impact in our local community and turn away fewer cases because of time constraints. These shortages mean fewer cases that doctors can see per day, and, while it seems greedy to state, the money

¹ Liss, D.J., Kerl, M.E., Tsai, C.L. (2020). “Factors associated with job satisfaction and engagement among credentialed small animal veterinary technicians in the United States.” *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association* (257) no. 5 (September 2020) 537-545.

² <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/veterinary-technologists-and-technicians.htm>

³ Wogan, Lisa (2018). “Veterinary technicians get a boost from a major employer.” <https://news.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=210&id=8771453>

aspect cannot be divorced from this discussion as veterinarians have huge educational debts to pay, and the additional earnings potential that a good staff affords to the doctor becomes significant in retaining doctors in the profession as well.

The most important part of this discussion is what we can do to improve staffing in our veterinary hospitals. The most obvious solution to this problem is to increase the pay for our support staff to a level more consistent with the equivalent in human medicine. Companies like VEG and Banfield have already instituted pay increases for their support staff and have noted dramatic decreases (by more than 50%) in turnover rate as a result.⁴ Many practice owners fear that increasing wages across the board for staff is not financially sustainable for the practice, but it is important not to forget about the costs associated with employee turnover. While there is not much data on the cost of staff turnover in the veterinary field, studies evaluating turnover costs in human medicine for nurses have found that the average replacement cost of a nurse is \$15,825; doctors have an even higher replacement cost.⁵ This number includes lost efficiency during training, costs of training, HR budgets, etc. that are found in veterinary medicine as well, meaning that this number should be relatively translational. This also means that from a business perspective we can afford to pay our staff a lot more (up to the cost of replacement), with little to no negative impact on practice profitability (maintain rather than replace). Furthermore, full utilization of our support staff to the extent legally allowed not only improves the practice profitability, but it also improves our staff's morale and feeling of self-value – a true win-win situation.⁶

Although there are many problems responsible for staff shortages in veterinary medicine, I believe that low pay and lack of respect represent the most important causes. These are complex issues that require a balanced approach to solve, but we have room to work as a profession to increase our efficiency while not increasing costs to our clients by much if any (more than otherwise). Ultimately, we cannot afford to allow the talent in our profession to go to waste or, worse, leave the profession.

⁴ Wogan, L (2018).

⁵ Waldman, J.D, Kelly, F., Sanjeev, A., Smith, H.L. (2010). "The shocking cost of turnover in health care." *Health Care Management Review* (2010) 35; 206-211. doi: 10.1097/HMR.0b013e3181e3940e

⁶ Wogan, L. (2018).