

Let students work against veterinary employee shortages

By Olivier Weber



There are a lot of people, including me, who dream of becoming a veterinarian. Only a few can actually become one. In the Netherlands, more than five times as many people apply for veterinary medicine than there's room for (1). In the United States, there was a jump of 19% percent of people applying for veterinary schools in 2021 (2). The students who do get in, are motivated and selected for their ability to learn and their skills (e.g. by doing tests or by having experience prior to being admitted into vet school). But this (increasing) popularity does not seem to be reflected in the working field; many veterinary businesses experience an increasing shortage of workers (3). Thus, the problem does not lie in the motivation of veterinarians but in something else.

The years after graduating can be hard. After studying for five or six years, you're finally able to do the job you have always wanted to do. But the hardest part has yet to come. The first year of work as a veterinarian can be tough. Graduates are used to the safe learning environment of university but immediately have to get used to being a veterinarian and all the responsibilities and demands this job comes with. This explains why young veterinarians are experiencing more burnout (4). Furthermore, the first year working as a veterinarian is often described as a 'make or break' period (5); you either are able to deal with the hard transition from university to work, or you are not.

During the past few years, working as a veterinary technician in an emergency clinic, I did see quite a few (mostly young) veterinarians come and go. And their reasons for leaving were mainly the same; they experienced too much stress and were sometimes even burned out. But they all had one thing in common: they still loved the job. This shows how it is not lack of interest in veterinary medicine that makes people switch or pause their veterinary career but the hard transition into working life.

In contrast to young veterinary medicine graduates, most recently graduated medical health care workers (e.g. human physicians) follow a structured training program after graduating university. In both veterinary medicine and human medicine, there is still a lot to learn on the job. So, would offering a structured training program (like human medical health care workers get) be a solution for the hard transition to the actual job? It most certainly is, but it is hard to realize. The cost of training programs after university can be high, something most clinics cannot afford. On top of that, there is a vicious cycle; because of a shortage of veterinarians, there is more pressure to work hard. Because of this, there is little room for intensive guidance of newly graduated veterinarians.

Because the transition is difficult and being intensively guided during your time working in a clinic as a veterinarian is hard to realize, it would be extremely useful to have working experience before starting your first job as a veterinarian. Having working experience in a small first-line practice as well as in a bigger emergency clinic made me realize how much there is to learn on the job, in addition to everything that is taught at university. Veterinarians I spoke to told me the same. Their first year of working as a veterinarian was a lot easier than those of non-working students they went to university with. They explained several possible explanations. Firstly, they were more used to a clinic-setting (e.g. contact with pet owners and administration). Secondly, they built up a larger frame of reference; they had seen a lot more patients with different diseases compared to students who did not work during their studies. And lastly, by working in a clinic, they could already practice important skills, like drawing blood.

In my experience, finding a side-job as a veterinary medicine student is extremely easy. Because of the shortage of veterinary technicians, most clinics can use any help they can find. Because the tasks of a technician are quite broad, it is easier for students to start with a simple job (e.g. cleaning, directly assisting the veterinarian) and slowly build up to more difficult tasks (e.g. drawing blood and doing triage).

However, unfortunately for most students, including myself at times, combining work with university can be extremely difficult. Most first-line practices are only open during the week at daytime (when most students have to attend university). Furthermore, you do have to work shifts during nights as well as weekends in most universities. This makes it hard to find a side-job in the veterinary field.

This is why it would be a great idea for universities to stimulate and facilitate students to work next to their studies. Possible ways of stimulating students to work, would be:

1. Offer a more flexible schedule, in order to let them combine their work schedule with university.
2. Creating periods with a day off of university (e.g. making a fuller schedule for four days, leaving one day off), making it possible to work. Or possibly even making it obligatory to work.
3. Giving study credits for working hours. Some programs offer credits for courses free of choice. It could be a good option to offer these credits for relevant working experience as well.

To conclude, the transition from being a student to being a veterinarian is hard. By having working experience before finishing university, this transition can be made a lot smoother. On top of this, students working as technicians also directly help with staff shortage. Universities should investigate ways to stimulate working next to studying, making it something every veterinary student can combine. For me personally, while I am still nervous about finishing university, I am sure that after a few more years of university and with a few more years of working experience, the transition into the working life will not be as hard as I imagine it to be now.

References

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