

## From the Ground Up: A Focus on Veterinary Technicians

by Elizabeth Handberg



It's a domino effect. One veterinary technician leaves the clinic or perhaps the veterinary profession as a whole. The practice scrambles to replace the technician while still trying to meet client demand. Appointments take longer, rooms get turned over more slowly, and the veterinarian and remaining support staff find themselves stretched to the limit, more stressed and more inefficient. Maybe some of the remaining support staff can no longer handle the increased workload and quit as well. Maybe the veterinarian finds themselves putting in longer days catching up on appointments and writing records and grows ever closer to burning out. Even if the practice is able to find a replacement for the technician, training a new technician can take weeks to months and incurs an opportunity cost in the time that the team could have spent seeing patients or performing procedures. But it will all be worth it once the new technician is firmly established as a valuable member of the team.

Or maybe the new technician takes a look around at the overworked, unhappy staff and decides to hit the road.

Clinics are hungry for new staff, but why are there so many vacancies in the first place? Credentialed veterinary technicians are well-educated individuals who bring considerable value to a practice.<sup>1</sup> However, the pathway to becoming a credentialed technician involves at least two years of education and often substantial levels of student debt. In the end, technicians can expect to make an average of \$15-\$20 per hour.<sup>2</sup> Imagine life as a new graduate from technician school. Want to have a family? Good luck providing for them with a salary that only pays \$2,000 a year more than the federal poverty guideline for a family of four.<sup>3</sup> What happens if a technician gets sick or injured? Better hope they're not part of the 30% of technicians who lack health insurance.<sup>2</sup> With the cost of living rising and technician wages remaining stagnant, it can be little wonder that many technicians leave the veterinary field altogether.

What does this mean for me and the newest generation of veterinarians? It means we will enter a field where inadequate support staff is yet another ordeal we must face. On top of dealing with overbooked appointments, soaring levels of student debt, and the ever-present threat of compassion fatigue, we will have to excuse ourselves from discussing treatment options with a client to instead draw blood on a fractious dog, since even the best technician can't collect a blood sample and restrain at the same time. With every additional task we take on that a credentialed veterinary technician is perfectly qualified to perform, we add to our own workload and take away from the time that could be spent examining patients, interpreting diagnostic tests, and performing other duties reserved for veterinarians. Burnout is a likely outcome for the overworked veterinarian, with a lack of work-life balance contributing to the nearly 40% of veterinarians who are considering leaving the profession.<sup>4</sup>

The number of problems contributing to the shortage of veterinarians and support staff seems almost insurmountable, and many of these challenges will require a cultural revolution in the veterinary community in order to change them. One way to start is by shifting the focus of veterinary practices to the retention and empowerment of their technician staff. Increasing the hourly wages of veterinary technicians will help practices recruit and retain staff. Reducing the turnover of veterinary technicians will mean wasting fewer resources sorting through applications, conducting interviews, and training new staff. As technicians stay with a practice for a greater length of time and become more familiar with the daily operations, their efficiency will rise, and they will be able to take on more responsibilities. This will allow for more appointments to be seen and more revenue to be generated, subsidizing the increase in wages. Veterinarians will be free to spend the same amount of time with the clients as before, since the increased number of appointments will be balanced out by the increased productivity of the staff and a faster turnaround time between clients.

Enabling veterinary technicians to work at the top of their license will allow veterinarians to work at the top of theirs. Delegating responsibilities will let veterinarians focus on the aspects of veterinary medicine that provide them with fulfillment, giving them a sense of purpose that will encourage them to stay in the field. Working together, veterinarians and support staff will both be able to achieve their full potential. But this process must begin from the ground up.

#### References

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