

After the DVM: Specialization in Animal Welfare

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ABSTRACT

As the public comes to expect higher levels of expertise in various areas of veterinary medicine, organizations have been created to certify that certain individuals have, in fact, achieved that higher level. Animal welfare is an area in which veterinarians have always been looked to for leadership, and it has now escalated to the level of needing an organization to oversee specialization. The American College of Animal Welfare has applied to the American Board of Veterinary Specialties for recognition as a new veterinary specialty organization.

Key words: veterinary specialties, animal welfare, AVMA, ABVS, board certification

INTRODUCTION

Specialty organizations have been a part of veterinary medicine since the first one, the American College of Veterinary Pathologists, was recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association in 1951.¹ Over the years, the number of specialties has grown, and the role of the specialist has become better defined.

PURPOSE OF VETERINARY SPECIALTIES

The primary purpose of a specialty organization has been to promote and ensure advanced levels of competency in specific disciplines of the profession. As the result of having organizations setting standards for education and examinations, veterinary colleagues who successfully achieve board certification have demonstrated to the profession and the public that they have a high minimum level of expertise. Board certification provides experts with recognized credentials for a higher order of responsibility when challenges come from outside groups. The results of complex court cases or legislative committee actions often hinge on the testimony of those with the highest level of credentialing and without direct conflicts of interest. These situations can be aided by having veterinary experts with certified special knowledge and skills.

As competencies increase with specialty education, the general level of knowledge about the subject increases throughout the profession. Fifty years ago, diabetes in dogs was a referable condition. Today, it is a condition new graduates can treat. As the specialties develop, students are exposed to higher levels of knowledge, and practitioners gain the same knowledge through continuing education programs.

In addition to establishing a level of expertise, specialization enhances veterinary services to the public. To meet these high expectations, practitioners have the option of referring a case to a colleague with the expertise to meet the individual's needs. For example, a reporter working on a story about the welfare of circus animals or a client interested in the impact of housing design on swine welfare could be referred to a veterinary expert for specific information on each subject.

There are secondary benefits to the development of specialty organizations. Most require some type of published research findings. The result is the generation of new knowledge, which in turn means this new knowledge becomes available to everyone with an interest, and it raises the specialty's minimum expectations. Another indirect benefit is the public education that occurs during interaction about cases and with the media.

AMERICAN BOARD OF VETERINARY SPECIALTIES

The American Board of Veterinary Specialties (ABVS) is the group within the American Veterinary Medical Association charged with certifying veterinary specialty organizations. The process is extensive, during which the proposed group develops an organizing committee. That committee will then develop all things necessary to function as a stand-alone organization capable of overseeing the education and evaluation of veterinarians interested in their discipline. In materials submitted to ABVS, the organizing committee must show that there is an extensive body of existing science, what individuals in training will be expected to learn, that the examination process will be comprehensive but fair, and that individuals in training will have access to materials and appeals that are appropriate for a reasonable likelihood of success. As of January 1, 2010, there are 20 ABVS-recognized specialties within veterinary medicine, with the last one being the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, recognized in 1993.¹ ABVS also recognizes 23 subspecialties of parent organizations at this time. As of November 1, 2009, two additional organizations had submitted petitions to ABVS and are under consideration, of which the American College of Animal Welfare (ACAW) is one.

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF ANIMAL WELFARE

Veterinarians in Animal Welfare

Perhaps the question of "Why a specialty in animal welfare?" would be more appropriately phrased as "Why not a specialty in animal welfare?" There are many reasons why the time is right.

Table 1: Major knowledge areas of the American College of Animal Welfare Role Delineation Document

Concepts and history of animal welfare (8 subsections containing 35 specific areas of knowledge)
Ethical issues (10 subsections containing 49 specific areas of knowledge)
Animal-welfare assessment considerations (6 subsections containing 45 specific areas of knowledge)
Role of the veterinary profession in promoting welfare (4 subsections containing 26 specific areas of knowledge)
Individual veterinarian's role in promoting welfare (6 subsections containing 28 specific areas of knowledge)
Impact of human, animal, and environmental interactions (9 subsections containing 39 specific areas of knowledge)
Regulations, policies, and guidelines (3 subsections containing 14 areas of knowledge)
Contemporary animal-welfare issues (9 subsections containing 465 areas of knowledge)

In numerous venues over the past several years, groups have expressed a strong desire for veterinarians to take the lead in animal-welfare issues. Because veterinary medicine has been ranked among the top three most trusted professions, the public already looks to veterinarians as trustworthy animal experts.^{2,3} Another advantage veterinarians have is that they understand the science and can talk to both those using the animals for an intended purpose (e.g., food or fiber, research, breeding, entertainment) and the public. Animal scientists play an important role in researching welfare-related questions but tend to report their findings to other scientists and not to those actually using the animals. Those using animals for various purposes talk among themselves but often fail to educate the public about practices that may be necessary to manage or care for animals in those situations. The average American has little understanding of the use of animals in biomedical research. Similarly, because most Americans are at least three generations away from the farm,^{4,5} they have limited knowledge about working animals. Veterinarians, then, are the common link between researchers, those who use and manage animals, and the public.

Added to the mix of poor communication between interested groups is the confusion that accompanies animal-welfare topics. Consider, for example, the challenges that are presented by the use of animals in agriculture. The public often thinks of idyllic green pastures, and the farmer thinks in terms of production. Animal welfare is really a compromise among several factors, with no single combination being the perfect welfare model. Factors such as social density; quality and quantity of food; pasture, pen, and cage size; exposure to diseases; and environmental temperature will vary by location, economic considerations, and individual animal. Discussions about welfare tend to selectively argue for or against a single aspect of animal care while ignoring others. For example, recent discussions about housing laying hens have tended to emphasize the negative aspects of battery cages, which do not allow expression of normal behaviors such as dust bathing, use of perches and nest boxes, and stretching, without mentioning the health and safety advantages. Free-range housing for chickens accommodates some positive aspects of behavior but is not as beneficial for disease control. A review of the science suggests that enriched cages or colony housing may be the best compromise.⁶ Unfortunately, many veterinarians are not knowledgeable about the current issues or science

of each side of various welfare-related issues and thus cannot effectively debate people espousing incomplete or incorrect information.

Animal-welfare issues are not just about science. They include ethical issues as well. In general, veterinarians are not particularly comfortable having philosophical discussions because this is not greatly emphasized during their training, yet this is an important part of welfare-related debates. Governmental and corporate policies are strongly driven by the public's philosophical concerns. Veterinarians who are involved in animal-welfare discussions will be ignored if they are unable to converse about both science and philosophy. Many times, these discussions include only one veterinarian—not one with expertise in poultry, a second with expertise in cattle, and a third with knowledge of swine—just one veterinarian. The more knowledgeable that person is about the breadth of welfare issues, the better the public and animals will be served.

Body of Knowledge

There is a huge body of information on animal-welfare-related topics. Seven scientific journals are devoted specifically to the subject, with three more containing numerous welfare articles in each issue. Eighty-one additional journals frequently contain articles that relate to animal welfare. Veterinary libraries contain hundreds of volumes that are indexed under animal welfare, with a recent search at Texas A&M University identifying 636 books on the subject. Similarly of interest was a recent Google search for *animal welfare books* that revealed 8,090,000 sites.

Organizing the available information is an important part of determining what would be expected of individuals wanting to become certified by ACAW. This exercise had previously occurred in the United Kingdom and Australia, where veterinary specialty organizations in animal welfare already exist. To that existing information, the ACAW Organizing Committee was able to alter and add items necessary to have the final product reflect the cultural character of the US. The resulting Role Delineation Document contains eight major areas of knowledge (Table 1), and each has many subcategories.

What Specialists Will Do

The need for specialists is great, and the opportunities are broad. There is already a large demand in governmental

agencies at both the state and the national level and by various industries, such as fast-food companies, establishing and monitoring their suppliers' animal-welfare practices. Research and academic faculties will have welfare specialists to ensure the best care for laboratory, teaching, and client-owned animals. Some specialists will be involved in private consulting, and still others will work for nonprofit organizations. However, these are not the limits of what welfare specialists will be doing. The whole area is rapidly evolving, with unforeseen opportunities still to be developed.

Requirements for Board Certification

Three pathways have been identified for veterinarians interested in becoming board certified by ACAW. The first, the Provisional Route, is a short-term opportunity for individuals who obtained their knowledge about the field before ACAW achieved ABVS recognition. After registering with ACAW, individuals will need to submit detailed documentation showing how and when they gained the knowledge in the eight areas defined by the Role Delineation Document. They must have at least two scientific publications in the area of animal welfare and ultimately pass the comprehensive examination.

For those individuals who are less advanced, the process can take one of two routes. The Training Program Route is the more traditional route toward board certification in any specialty. This will involve enrollment in and completion of an ACAW-approved training program. It will also include a requirement for two peer-reviewed scientific publications in the area of animal welfare, as well as successful completion of an examination. The final pathway is called an Alternate Route, which will require that the person design a program of study, with the help of an ACAW mentor, that meets all the requirements of an approved Training Program Route, and the program must be accepted by ACAW as being equivalent. Alternate Route trainees must also meet the publication and examination requirements.

Current Status

The 28-member ACAW Organizing Committee has been busy over the past 3 years developing the documents needed to petition the ABVS. This petition was submitted

in October 2009, and the group is hopeful that official recognition will be granted in February 2011.

Development of a veterinary specialty is a labor-intensive effort by a group of dedicated individuals. Recognition of the ACAW as a specialty involves not just the typical scientific basis but also a philosophical component that will allow veterinary medicine to retain its rightful place as the go-to profession for animal health and welfare.

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