

Cultivating Clinical Excellence: Trends in the Education of Veterinary Interns, Residents, and Fellows

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Introduction

In recent years, complex efforts have been underway to advance specialty veterinary education. This presentation considers the following questions:

1. What is driving the evolution of veterinary specialty education?
2. What organizations are involved? How are they working together to enact positive change?
How can collaborations be improved?
3. Why do training programs need to be flexible?
4. What is the definition of rigor in veterinary specialty training?
5. What is competency-based education and assessment?
6. What is the definition of an internship? A residency? A fellowship?
7. What legal challenges must be considered?

Drivers of the Evolution of Specialty Education

Efforts to advance veterinary specialty education have in part been driven by increased demand for veterinary specialty care because of a rise in companion animal ownership (especially dog ownership), “humanization” of pets, and increased uptake of pet health insurance plans. Owners of companion animals worldwide are seeking highly specialized procedures such as total hip replacements, open heart surgery, minimally invasive surgical options, stereotactic brain surgery, specialized diabetes care and apheresis. This has driven the creation of a variety of fellowship training programs designed to advance the training of board-certified veterinary specialists. Concurrently, veterinary graduates who might have previously pursued specialty training are demanding more flexible and affordable pathways to specialization because of the desire for improved work-life balance and the need to repay educational loans. These desires have also driven movement of trainees away from academia and towards careers in private specialty practice, where work weeks might be shorter and salaries higher. The relatively high costs of operating some academic teaching hospitals (owing to the teaching mission and University overheads) have led some hospitals to partner with corporate private practices to train residents, in some cases with contracts

that require graduating residents to work for the company that supported their training. This also has the potential to drain specialists from academia, where they are needed to support clinical innovation and teach the next generation of veterinarians. In recognition of this, some corporate groups are matching financial support for private practice trainees with support for new academic veterinary specialists.

Flexibility versus Rigor

Proliferation of a diverse array of training programs and attempts to increase flexibility by offering modular training programs, distance training programs, programs that do not require an internship, and certificate programs have raised concerns about training program rigor, erosion of the quality of specialty care, and the inability of consumers (animal owners) to differentiate among graduates from various types of training programs. At the same time, more evidence is needed to determine how training programs can be tailored to optimize outcomes for patients, their owners, and training program graduates. Feedback from trainees to specialty colleges has at times indicated a lack of adherence by some training sites to specialty college requirements, calling for improved oversight, including site visits and the possibility of an independent accrediting body similar to the Accreditation Council on Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). Outcomes Work has also been underway to develop competency-based veterinary specialty education and assessment frameworks by several specialty colleges, corporate entities, and organizations such as the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges. The Veterinary Specialty Organizations Committee of the American Veterinary Medical Association also has been working on guidance for specialty colleges regarding training program requirements; efforts to address the shortage of veterinary specialist educators; and oversight of internship, residency, and fellowship training programs. Re-defining fellowships has been complicated by the different contexts in which the term has been applied in the past, either by training institutions or specialty colleges.

Legal and Mission Considerations

The evolution of veterinary specialty education also has unearthed legal challenges that require thoughtful consideration and integration into change management processes. Several specialty colleges (including the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine and the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmology) have separated their membership and certification arms; while connecting them can improve specialist engagement, certification bodies are primarily obligated to serving the public, and membership associations are obligated to act in the best interest of their

members. In a legal context, that leaves organizations open to allegations that the profession is acting on behalf of its members, and as a barrier to competition.

In order to improve the defensibility of the examination process, there has also been evolution of examination development to include regular job task analyses and use of psychometricians to set pass points.

Care must also be taken not to exclude entities from participating in the training of a specialist or imposing certain requirements on candidates. Such behavior has the potential to lead to antitrust litigation. This was exemplified by the recent proposed class action lawsuit by veterinary interns that targeted the Veterinary Internship and Residency Matching Program (VIRMP).

Further Reading

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