

MISSION STATEMENT

To improve the economic base of the veterinary profession, ensuring that the delivery of veterinary care and service meets the needs of society.

In its continuing effort to explore the findings presented in the KPMG Study, the NCVEI asked Dr. Daryl Buss, who serves on the Commission's Board of Directors, to offer his perspective on the changing demographics occurring in veterinary medicine today. In addition to serving on the Board, Dr. Buss is Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For additional reading on economic issues see pages 332-338 of this issue of the JAVMA for the executive summary of the Brakke management and behavior study.

Changing demographics

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"The Current and Future Market for Veterinarians and Veterinary Medical Services in the United States,"¹ hereafter termed the KPMG Report, discussed the major shift in gender distribution that has occurred in veterinary medicine. It noted that the number of women in our profession has increased dramatically, from 318 women in 1967 to 6,080 in 1997.¹ Although the KPMG Report suggested some factors that may have supported this demographic change, our understanding of the causes is at best limited and incomplete.

Will the current proportion of men and women entering our profession be maintained in the future? For several reasons, I believe the answer is yes. First, those factors, however ill defined, that have made veterinary medicine such a strong career goal for many women will likely continue to exist. Further, the percentage of male students enrolling as undergraduate students at US colleges and universities is decreasing. In 1970, 55% of undergraduate students at US universities and colleges were men, whereas in 1999, less than 45% of undergraduate students were men.² This trend is occurring even though there were more male high school graduates in 1998

than women.³ Clearly then, interest in a college education among men is decreasing significantly, at a rate that is prompting concern and discussion among colleges and universities.² Although causes for this phenomenon are unknown, it will, if it continues, tend to maintain a relatively high proportion of women in the veterinary school applicant pool. In addition, data from the National Bureau of Labor Statistics⁴ indicates that the percentage of women in the US civilian labor force has steadily increased. The trend is predicted to continue at least to the year 2006, the ending year for their projection. For these and other reasons, it seems likely that the present gender profile of graduating classes will be maintained.

The KPMG Report noted several differences between genders in the responses to specific questions. Women will make up half of the profession by 2004,¹ so it is important that true gender-based differences in values, attitudes, and preferences be understood. That is a difficult challenge, given the many societal and generational factors that, in addition to gender, influence our attitudes and preferences. When we consider characteristics attributed to groups of

individuals such as men or women, we must distinguish between ascribed characteristics, which are those we are born with or acquire but cannot ordinarily change by ourselves, from achieved characteristics, such as levels of education or experience.⁵ The latter are under our control and can be more readily modified. The majority of responses that the KPMG Report found to differ by gender are, in my view, achieved characteristics, an important distinction as we look toward the future.

Attitudes and values are clearly influenced by many factors beyond gender. Sociologists have devised several generational groupings, and have developed an array of labels for each generation. Thus, the term "Mature" has been used to describe the generation of individuals born before 1946, "Baby Boomers" for those born between 1946 and 1964, and "Generation X" for those born between 1965 and 1985.⁶ Generation X has been characterized as the generation that is creative, accepts change well, is comfortable with technology, is independent, is not intimidated by authority, and does not seek approval of those in authority.⁶ It has also been suggested that Baby Boomers and Generation Xers have a greater orientation toward their own career development than they do in volunteering or supporting group needs or causes.⁶

Despite these well publicized labels and characterizations, each of us can readily identify many individuals who fall within these generations but who do not resemble their group at large. This emphasizes that we must not move beyond useful characterization, such as identifying differences truly based on

gender, to stereotyping of individuals within groups. Stereotyping of individuals, whether based on gender, age, ethnicity, or other factors, is a destructive process that is divisive rather than inclusive, and discourages demographic diversity.

Although the KPMG Report did not address the need to encourage greater demographic diversity within veterinary medicine, we must recognize that such diversity will be essential for the success of our profession in a continuously changing society. By the year 2020, for example, our society will increase in median age from 33 to 38 years, and groups now considered minorities will comprise a much larger proportion of our population.⁶ These changes have many important implications to our profession, including veterinary schools and colleges. One implication is that we must broaden and increase our profession's appeal to a far more diverse group of students than we have thus far attracted into our profession. That means that we cannot simply be content with reflecting on the gender changes documented in the KPMG Report, but must develop strategies by which our profession can better adapt to our continually evolving society.

The assessment and insight provided by the KPMG Report, analyses by various specialty groups, and other studies have given us a useful point of reference, but we must now shift our emphasis toward developing the vision, foresight, and plans to lead us into the future. We are in a similar position of that of Alice in her opening question to the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland":

Alice: "Will you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

Alice: "I don't care."

Cheshire Cat: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Unlike Alice in this story, we care very much about where we are going! Consequently, the determination of where veterinary medicine wants to go and should go, and the development of strategies of how to get there, is our next challenge.

References

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