Round Table Discussion

New Graduates: Facts, Feelings, and Future

Could you imagine spending 4 years (and potentially longer, if you chose to do an internship or residency) slogging your way through veterinary school, digging yourself deep into debt only to find that once you graduate, you can’t get a job? That is apparently what many new veterinary school graduates are facing today. According to a recent article in The New York Times, in 2012, 39% of new veterinary school graduates had no job offers, up from 19% in 1999. Plus, according to statistics from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), starting salaries for veterinarians in 2012 (adjusted for inflation) have sunk over the past decade by approximately 13%, to $65 404 ($45 575 when including those taking advanced education). Furthermore, the debt to income ratio for the average new veterinarian is nearly twice that of a physician’s. With such poor prospects, one wonders why anyone would want to go to veterinary school at all. Yet, according to the AVMA, class sizes at almost all of the 28 US veterinary schools have been rising over the past few years, despite the ever-rising cost of a veterinary education (now, on average, $63 000/y for out-of-state tuition and living expenses).

The problem is that, although there is no shortage of people who want to become veterinarians, with the economic recession, there has been a decline in demand for veterinary services. Currently, there are approximately 91 000 veterinarians working in the United States, and both state-funded and private veterinary schools whose budgets have been cut are trying to make up for lost revenue by increasing class sizes. There are plans to open 4 new veterinary schools, one in New York, another in Tennessee, and two in Arizona, in the next few years. These plans, combined with the recent increase in applications to schools in the Caribbean and the push to accredit foreign schools will likely soon lead to an even larger pool of new graduates. With the glut of new graduates and the recent decline in demand for veterinary care reflected in lower starting salaries, prospects for new veterinarians are grim. The hope is that the economy will rebound, and the demand for pet care will rise to meet the increasing supply of new veterinarians. Time will tell whether this will be the case.

To address the concerns of new veterinarians who are facing these economic challenges, I have invited 6 recent graduates to tell you their thoughts. The participants are Andy Anderson, DVM, Banfield Veterinary Hospital, Rockaway, NJ, USA; Jacquelyn S. Curfman, DVM, Summer-tree Animal and Bird Clinic, Dallas, TX, USA; Robert J. Edwards, DVM, Bakerstown Animal Hospital, Bakerstown, PA, USA; Erica Lynn Giles, DVM, Kensington Bird and Animal Hospital, Kensington, CT, USA; Justin X. Nowowiejski, DVM, The Veterinary Emergency Group, White Plains, NY, USA; and Kristin M. Spink-Hauger, DVM, Two by Two Animal Hospital, Berrien Springs, MI, USA. I think that hearing their comments will alert all veterinarians, both rookies and old timers, to some of the concerns that face the veterinary profession today.

Laurie Hess, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice)
Associate Editor

Question: If you were to choose your career again, would you choose veterinary medicine?

Dr Anderson:
If I had to start over, I would still choose veterinary medicine. There is no other career I can honestly say would leave me feeling as fulfilled.

Dr Curfman:
Most definitely! I am immensely enjoying my new career and my place of employment.

Dr Edwards:
Yes, I definitely would.