
Letter

Re: Laboratory Animal Medicine in a Time of Crisis

To the Editor,

Dr. Abigail Smith, in her August 2001 editorial (1), painted a dire picture of a diminishing veterinary infrastructure in the face of continued growth of the animal-based research enterprise. Dr. Smith cites a paucity of training opportunities for veterinarians to be the root cause, but I am not certain that this is the case. Superficially, it appears that the opportunities for training exist at a scale sufficient to meet the approximate national need. For example, ACLAM, via its web site, lists and recognizes 33 training programs affiliated with academic institutions and pharmaceutical companies and an additional three associated with the uniformed services. If each one of these programs delivers an average of one veterinarian per year to the current marketplace, we can meet estimates of current need (1,2). The problem appears to be that this is not being done.

Why are we not training sufficient numbers of veterinarians? Dr. Smith attributes this first to inadequate numbers of NCCR-funded training programs and second to the inability of public and private research institutions to compensate. This may be true, but it also suggests an over reliance upon the NCCR to meet the national demand for entry level clinical veterinarians. While formerly the flagship of our national training effort in laboratory animal medicine, the role of an NCCR-funded program has evolved to one of producing a veterinarian-scientist and, hopefully, one devoted to investigating and solving problems important to laboratory animal care, science and medicine. That also means that the void left in producing scientifically literate, scientist-friendly clinicians needs to be filled by entities that do not receive, and are not constrained by, NCCR funding. In a situation analogous to medical schools and hospitals training physician interns, residents, and fellows, research universities and other entities with the wherewithal, must provide training for coming generations of laboratory animal medicine clinical specialists.

If we have sufficient training opportunities, the fundamental problem could be that we are not attracting enough promising veterinarians into our field. This can be remedied. All of us can contribute to the recruitment process by identifying promising candidates, extolling the virtues of careers in laboratory animal medicine to them, and directing viable applicants to the types of training programs that meet their career goals. Recruitment needs to be done, most importantly, by those in our specialty at veterinary schools who are in the best position to interact with students through teaching, mentoring work study experiences, serving as advisors to clubs, and the like. Another important group of contributors to the recruitment effort are those of us at institutions that are able to provide summer jobs or academic year internships in laboratory animal medicine for veterinary students and those of us that interact with Pre-Vet Clubs. In particular, academic year student internships at research institutions, lasting 2-4 weeks, offer significant potential benefit at relatively low cost in terms of time, money and resources. There are significant numbers of students that want these experiences. We need to market them and provide them. Unfortunately, the evidence that I have suggests that we are not making these contacts. For example, in evaluating 14 applications to our program last year where the applicant provided references, only 11% of those references were ACLAM Diplomates and 21% were ASLAP members. Over one-third of our applicants, judging from their list of references, had no apparent meaningful career-related contact with a laboratory animal medicine specialist. These are failing performances.

We should not have to be galvanized by a crisis to act proactively on behalf of our profession. My appeal is that we should be recruiting all of the time and we all have a part to play. The best news is that where we have been remiss, it is not too late for any of us to make up lost ground.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Huerkamp, DVM

References

1. **Smith, A. L.** 2001. Laboratory animal medicine in a time of crisis (Editorial). *Comp. Med.* 51(4):290.
2. **Weigler, B. J., J. D. Thulin, S. Vandewoude, and T. L. Wolfle.** 1997. The supply and demand for laboratory animal veterinarians from 1980 to 2005. *Contemporary Topics* 36(2):39-46.