Sex and the profession

WHAT accounts for the increasing proportion of women in the veterinary profession, and does it actually matter?

These are not new questions, but they are worth revisiting in the light of a report in the Journal of the American Veterinary Association this month.1 In the USA, as in the UK, the gender balance of the veterinary profession has changed dramatically over the past 30 to 40 years; having previously been very much in the minority, women now make up about 50 per cent of the profession, and the proportion is set to rise further given that women account for nearly 80 per cent of students at veterinary school. The report describes a study undertaken in the USA by Anne Lincoln, a sociologist at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, which tried to find out why this has been happening.2

Using data provided by the Association of American Veterinary Colleges, Dr Lincoln examined a number of factors that could have affected enrolment to US veterinary colleges between 1975 and 1995. Enrolment of male students fell from 89 per cent in the 1969/70 academic year to 22.4 per cent in 2008/09, with the switch to a female majority occurring around 1987.

The shift to more female students started after 1972, when legislation was introduced in the USA prohibiting discrimination against female students. ‘I found that, after 1972, when the barriers to entry were dropped, women began enrolling in larger numbers,’ Dr Lincoln said. ‘Male applicants dropped sharply after 1976, the first year that applicant statistics were collected.’

After that, the findings suggested that, in the USA at least, men were put off going to veterinary school by the increasing enrolment of women – a phenomenon Dr Lincoln referred to as ‘pre-emptive flight’. ‘There was really only one variable where I found an effect, and that was the proportion of women already enrolled in vet med schools,’ she said. ‘So perhaps a young male student says he is going to visit a veterinary medical school, and when he sees a classroom with a lot of women he changes his choice of graduate school. That is what the findings indicate.’

The study found no evidence that men were more concerned about the cost of tuition and salaries. ‘There has always been this notion for any field that feminises that women don’t care about salaries because they have a husband’s earnings to fall back on,’ Dr Lincoln said. ‘But this study found that men and women are equally affected by tuition and salaries.’ She also noted that, in the USA, where veterinary medicine is a postgraduate degree, fewer men than women are graduating with a Bachelor’s degree, so they aren’t applying because they don’t have the prerequisites.

Care must be taken in translating these observations to the situation in the UK, where for most students veterinary medicine is a first degree. Nevertheless, the comparison is interesting, not least because the demographic trend is so similar. Possible causes and the likely implications of a predominantly female profession were discussed in some detail at the BVA Congress in 2006, where comparison was made with some detail at the BVA Congress in 2006, where comparison was made with the medical profession, where a similar shift has been observed (VR, October 14, 2006, vol 159, pp 501, 505-506). Among points made at the congress were that there were ‘occupationally relevant differences’ between men and women and that these needed to be taken into account when planning and managing services, with the development of appropriate career structures. While some were concerned that a more even balance should be maintained, others felt that much of the impact of a growing proportion of women would be positive, with women having a ‘more caring’ attitude and catalysing changes in the profession’s working patterns that might include flexible working, better provision for career breaks and an improved work-life balance.

Delegates were also told of a study by the American Veterinary Medical Association of attitudes among vets and clients, which found that, in the small animal sector at least, the majority of clients (88 per cent) were not concerned about the gender of the vet; the important thing was that they obtained a professional service. Perhaps it is on this – providing the required service – that attention should focus.

One thing that is clear is that the proportion of women in the profession will continue to increase in the years ahead and – if the conclusion from the recent American study holds good in the UK – the trend among applicants could be self-perpetuating. If this is the case, the profession needs to embrace the change and plan ahead accordingly.

1. Study seeks to explain feminization of veterinary profession. www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/dec10/101215l.asp

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