

Comment

Meeting future demand

THEY say that, if it happens in America, it won't be long before it happens here. Even so, a recent study of 'Workforce needs in veterinary medicine' carried out by the US National Academy of Sciences should be of more than passing interest to vets in the UK.* Undertaken with support from the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, the American Veterinary Medical Association and others, it sought to address 'not only current workforce estimates, but also the unmet needs that the profession must address in order to remain relevant to society'. Although primarily concerned with the situation in the USA, some of the problems identified have a familiar ring. Indeed, in many respects, they resemble those discussed in the Lowe report in the UK in 2009, suggesting that the veterinary profession faces similar challenges on both sides of the Atlantic.

Challenges identified in the US report include maintaining the economic stability of veterinary practice and education, building its scholarly foundation and evolving to meet changing societal needs. In particular, it notes, 'In recent years, the dominant focus of the profession has shifted from farm animal health to companion animal care, and concerns are growing that this emphasis is directing resources away from veterinary medicine's other, equally important, roles in basic research, public service, food production and other sectors, resulting in a workforce that may be insufficient to address priorities for protecting and advancing animal and human health.' It suggests that the current focus of the veterinary profession leaves the needs of research, food security and public health 'underserved' and that, without immediate action, the veterinary academic

community could fail to prepare the next generation of veterinarians for teaching and research positions, as well as for jobs in state diagnostic laboratories, federal research and regulatory agencies, and the pharmaceutical and biologicals industries. It also notes that increasing debt from veterinary education could inhibit graduates from pursuing PhD training that would prepare them for academic careers and key jobs in the public sector and industry (*VR*, June 9, 2012, vol 170, p 580).

The report concludes that there are sectors of unmet need for veterinarians, although it found little evidence of workforce shortages currently. However, like the Lowe report (*VR*, August 15, 2009, vol 165, pp 185, 186-188), it did find an imbalance in the distribution of veterinarians, noting that, although there are no widespread shortages of veterinarians overall, some sectors are struggling to find well-qualified candidates, even when offering high salaries. Looking to the future, it draws attention to growing demand for animal products and the importance of the 'One Health' concept in recognising the linkages between people, wild and domestic animals and their ecosystems, and suggests that veterinary organisations and veterinary colleges should work together to increase the visibility, standing and potential of the veterinary profession to address global food security.

The report includes some interesting observations on the development of farm and companion animal practice in the USA, as well as on veterinary education and the economic sustainability of the profession. Regarding farm animal practice, it notes, for example, that, while primary services are still needed in rural areas, these communities

often cannot financially support positions for full-time food animal vets, leaving gaps in animal care and raising concerns about disease surveillance. It suggests that the veterinary profession should formulate new ways of delivering cost-effective services in rural America, including use of veterinary technicians. Regarding companion animal practice, it says that future growth of this sector is uncertain, and that more economic and demographic data are needed to help build a strategy to match supply to demand.

Not all of the issues discussed in the report are directly applicable to the European situation, where different solutions may need to be, and in some cases are being, pursued. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the profession in the USA is seeking to address the challenges and there are undoubtedly parallels to be drawn.

Perhaps one of the most challenging observations in the report concerns changing society's perception of the profession, which may also require the profession to change its perception of itself: 'Society tends to view the veterinary profession through the narrow lens of companion animal medicine. The profession has not done enough to expand recognition of its immense responsibilities in addressing global food security and resilience. Tackling the multiple dimensions of One Health and sustainable food security will require a new, broader definition of veterinary medicine, of its foundational competencies, and the focus that veterinary medicine must take.'

* Available at <http://dels.nas.edu/Report/Workforce-Needs-Veterinary-Medicine/13413>

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