

## Research Note

### **RECRUITMENT TO FOOD ANIMAL VETERINARY MEDICAL PRACTICE IN LOUISIANA**

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The contemporary livestock and poultry industry in the United States is centered around the production of meat, milk, and eggs. These animal foods represent a major portion of the American diet with about one-half of the U.S. food dollars being spent for them (CAST, 1980:53). Both the food and livestock-poultry industries rely on the services of veterinarians to maintain the quality of food products and the health of animals that produce them. This paper explores selected background variables related to recruitment into the practice of food animal veterinary medicine. This is done with data obtained from students at the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine (LSU-SVM). At the outset, it should be noted that this study is exploratory in nature.

Louisiana's livestock and poultry industry yields approximately \$500 million annual cash receipts (Fielder and Nelson, 1983). Dairy products, cattle and calves, broilers, and eggs rank among the top 10 commodities in the state in terms of receipts. This suggests that adequate numbers of livestock and poultry are available to support food animal veterinary medical practices. Of course, some of the services for food animals are provided by veterinarians in mixed practices, but the focus in this paper is on recruitment to food animal practices, because this goal more clearly defines interest in working with food animals.

As of 1982, 10 of the 608 veterinarians in the state were engaged in large animal practice, excluding exclusive equine practices (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1983). Two of the ten had exclusive bovine practices. All but one of the ten were self-employed. Only two of them were graduates of LSU, which graduated its first class in 1977; one of these was the single private practitioner.

#### **Previous research**

Snizek and Bryant (1975:36) have noted that research on veterinary medical practitioners is virtually nonexistent. Indeed, their study of veterinarians in Virginia (Snizek and Bryant, 1975; Bryant and Snizek, 1976), a study in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina (Crawford et al., 1973), and a study in Indiana (Holdeman, 1965) are the only major studies that could be located.

In their study, Crawford et al. (1973) found only 7 percent of the veterinarians to be engaged in large animal practice exclusively, 5 percent in large animal predominant practice, and 9 percent in mixed practice. Of those who had changed practice type, the largest percentage had changed to small animal practice from mixed or large animal practices. Holdeman (1965) studied veterinarians, employers of veterinarians, and college students. The major findings of his study were that veterinarians were spending less time in large animal activities than they had 10 to 15 years earlier, that there was less optimism about opportunities in large animal medicine than in other specialties, and that the need of future students from a rural background was diminishing.

Snizek and Bryant (1975) were concerned with specialization in the veterinary medical profession; they surveyed preveterinary and veterinary students as well as practicing veterinarians. One of their conclusions pertinent to this study was that large animal practitioners tended to come from rural areas. Moreover, the percentage of veterinary students who wanted to engage in large animal practice was lower than the percentage of preveterinary students, and the percentage of veterinarians in large animal practice was even lower. However, Snizek and Bryant combined thoroughbred practice with large or farm animal practice, so specific comparisons cannot be made concerning food animal practice. This study complements their research with respect to veterinary students; students who have selected food animal practice are compared to the other students in the LSU-SVM.

### **Study design**

Data for this study come from larger research projects supported by the LSU-SVM, "Veterinary Medicine and Veterinarians: Recruitment, Training, and Practice in Louisiana," and by the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station in its project "Food Animal Veterinary Medicine: Practice in Louisiana (H-2396)." Data utilized here are taken from a questionnaire completed by each entering class. A total of five classes are used--those entering in the fall of 1978 through the fall of 1982. Each class was composed of 80 students, the majority of whom were Louisiana residents. The questionnaires were completed on the first day of registration for each fall semester.

Only 16 students indicated that they would seek a position in food animal practice upon graduation--either as an employee, a partner, or self-employed. These were distributed fairly evenly across the five classes with two students from 1978, three each from 1979 and 1980, and four each from 1981 and 1982. The responses of these students are compared to those of the 384 other students for a wide range of characteristics relative to background, high school, and vocational choice. Where appropriate, the Irwin-Fisher exact test of significance (Marascuilo and McSweeney, 1977) is used to test for differences between the

two groupings of students.

## Results

### Background

Sex: In terms of sex, food animal practice was sought by 10 male and 6 female students. This sex-ratio does not differ significantly (62% and 38%) from that for the other students in the five classes used here (61% and 39%). That female students were approximately equally represented among those seeking food animal practices upon graduation was unexpected.

Residence: Nine of the sixteen students seeking a food animal position (56%) had lived in rural areas for most of their lives. Since only 30% of the other students in these classes came from rural areas, food animal practice was significantly associated with a rural background (1-tailed test,  $p = 0.0279$ ). The nine rural students (56%) also indicated that their parents had lived on a farm or ranch for most of their lives, compared with only 19% of the other students. However, only one of the food animal students said his father was a farmer.

Parental income: The range of parental income of the food animal students, from \$15,000 to \$75,000, was not as wide as that of their classmates, which was from below \$5,000 to above \$100,000. The median category in both instances was \$25,000-\$49,999. Thus, students seeking a food animal practice differed little from the other students, and they were drawn from almost all income levels represented among students in the school.

Parental education: Levels of education for both fathers and mothers of students seeking food animal practice were slightly below those of the other students and varied less. The medians for the food animal students were 7.5 for father and 6 for mother, compared with 8 and 7, respectively, for the other students (8 represents college graduate, 7 indicates some college, and 6 involves technical training after high school graduation).

### High school

High school type and size: All of the food animal students had graduated from public high schools while 5% and 21% of the other students graduated from private nonreligious and private religious schools, respectively. There was virtually no difference between the students seeking a food animal practice and the other students in the size of high school graduating class. The median category in both instances was 200-399.

Agriculture courses, FFA & 4-H: Somewhat less than half of all the students had taken agriculture courses in high school if they were offered. The students seeking a food animal practice were only slightly more likely (43%) to have taken these courses than were the other students (37%). However, marked differences were apparent in related

activities. One-fourth of the students seeking a food animal practice had participated in FFA, and more than one-half had participated in 4-H. Approximately one-tenth of the other students had participated in FFA, and one-fifth had participated in 4-H. Hence, the food animal practice oriented students are over-represented among those with FFA and 4-H experience.

#### Vocational choice

Thinking and deciding: The mean age when food animal students began thinking about becoming veterinarians was 13.0, and the mean age when they had definitely decided was 17.5. The respective mean ages for the veterinary students seeking other types of practices were 14.2 and 18.2. Median ages were 13 and 19 for the food animal students compared with 14 and 18 for the other students. Thus, students seeking food animal practices began thinking about becoming veterinarians slightly earlier but tended to commit themselves no earlier.

Influence of veterinarian: More than one-third of the students seeking food animal practices said a veterinarian had been very influential in helping them decide to become veterinarians, and more than one-half indicated that a veterinarian had some influence in their decisions. These percentages were reversed for the other students. As might be expected, the most influential veterinarian for the food animal student was a large animal practitioner, while small animal and mixed practitioners were more influential for the other students.

Influence of experience: Working with livestock was considered to have been very influential in deciding to become a veterinarian by all the students seeking a food animal practice. Only one-half of the other students considered this experience to have been very influential. Similarly, working with horses was considered to have been very influential by 62% of the food animal students, but by only 42% of the other students. Raising animals for show and for commercial use was a very influential experience for well over one-third of those oriented toward food animal practice, but less than one-fifth of the other students considered these experiences as very influential. In contrast, only one-third of the food animal students considered "knowing a veterinarian" and "working for a veterinarian" as very influential experiences, compared with approximately two-thirds of the other students in each instance. Experiences which differed little between the two groups were owning pets, reading about veterinarians, and "liking" animals.

Source of information on specialty: Food animal students most often obtained information or gained interest in their specialty area from a large animal veterinarian. Among the other students, this source was most likely to be a small animal veterinarian.

## Summary and discussion

This exploratory study showed that veterinary students planning to seek positions in food animal practice differed from the other students in several ways. These students tended to come from rural areas, and they apparently lived on part-time farms (only one father was engaged in farming as the main occupation). Another noteworthy characteristic was that all of the food animal students had graduated from public high schools. Also, considerably more of them had participated in FFA and 4-H activities. They also began thinking about becoming veterinarians at earlier ages than did the other students. Another distinguishing trait was that all of them considered working with animals to have been very influential in their career decisions. Other influential experiences were working with horses, raising animals for show, and raising animals for commercial use. Most often they obtained information or gained interest in their specialty from a large animal veterinarian.

These findings support earlier studies and also provide insights into recruiting veterinarians into food animal practice. The number of veterinary students who said they would seek a position in food animal practice upon graduation exceeded the number of veterinarians already engaged in such practices in the state. Whether opportunities will be available when the students graduate is not known, despite the apparent continuing need for food animal practitioners. Veterinarians in mixed practices provide services for food animals, and this may be a more economically viable alternative to an exclusive food animal practice. An obvious need exists for research with respect to providing veterinary services to the livestock industry. Specific attention should be devoted to concerns such as the nature of services provided by veterinarians as well as the stability of career plans among veterinary students during their professional training.

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