



“You’ve come a long way baby!”

The evolution of veterinary medicine by Dr. Jan Batker, DVM
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This slogan from an ad campaign sums up the progress of veterinary medicine in this country. The irony is that this feminist phrase applies to a profession increasingly given over to women, once excluded from the field. This transition has been possible as modern veterinary practice has evolved, a result of our success in disease control and prevention, in animal husbandry and in improving public health. The common thread that continues to run throughout our experience is the passionate interest in and love for animals that veterinarians feel.

The majority of veterinary school graduates enter private clinical practice, caring for companion animals. Only since World War II has this been our major focus, as the value of companion animals has undergone a remarkable change, while at the same time we saw the advent of new drugs and improvement in surgical methodology and anesthesia. The horse had become more important in sport than in mass transportation and farming, and the family farm began to fade away. Of course, cats and dogs have served humans as companions for thousands of years—the dog was most likely the first domesticated animal—but until we moved away from agriculture as the primary means by which we made our livelihood, they did not have such exclusive claim to our affections and experience. Within last few decades the veterinarian has become the “other family doctor”.

Our role prior to that has been quite a different one. The development of civilization was dependant upon the domestication of animals. Many individuals since ancient times, magicians, priests or doctors, have specialized in treating animal diseases, but it wasn’t until literacy rates began to increase that records could be made of various ailments and treatments and anatomy charts produced. During the 16th and 17th century we began to see gifted and talented individuals begin to refute the superstition surrounding healing and embrace the scientific study of medicine.

People at this time were subject to horrific disease epidemics such as the bubonic plague. Less well known is the fact that millions of food animals on which they depended often suffered similar outbreaks of disease and died in huge numbers. Horses, the backbone of the military machine, also experienced a periodic decline in number as a consequence of war and infectious disease. It was to preserve and protect the horse that the first veterinary school was established in 1761 in France. It was this endeavor that stimulated men with similar interests to come together to advance the cause of animal health. The loss of animals to contagious disease was too costly to human wellbeing. The great strides in understanding this field were not made without mistakes by those who had limited means beyond observation and experimentation with which to pursue progress. The first veterinarians also took risks, because many diseases of animals affect men too. This was a time when blood letting was a commonly prescribed cure for problems and anesthesia was unknown; veterinarians were not highly regarded. Some physicians with interests in common with veterinarians began to enter the field, but even as diseases were

characterized and husbandry improved, there were few drugs and no vaccines with which to fight disease.

It was really as scientific knowledge exploded in the 19th century that the sciences of physiology and microbiology were born and we began to gain some understanding and control of animal disease. The first rabies vaccine was developed by a chemist, Louis Pasteur as veterinarians were working hard to improve their abilities, and the field was attracting men of more intellect. In the late 19th century veterinarians acquired more respect as they were increasingly employed in ensuring the quality of the public's food stores. Training in anatomy and pathology gave them superior abilities in screening animal food products for diseases such as tuberculosis. Human deaths were common from many diseases we wouldn't recognize the names of now!

Veterinarians had always played an important role in the military managing the health of war horses, although they were originally known as marshals or farriers. This was a difficult undertaking, but they also assumed responsibility the safety of the food and water supply of the troops. They oversaw the healthcare of the dogs in military service and even the homing pigeons used to carry messages between outposts before telephone and telegraph.

The first veterinary school in North America was founded in Canada, and in 1852 the Veterinary College of Philadelphia was founded. Most veterinarians in the U.S. at this time were self-taught or graduates of foreign schools. It was the now defunct Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) founded in 1884 that each year until its dispersal in 1984 did the basic research that allowed us to understand and eliminate many livestock diseases and transport animals more safely. Their employees worked in the field testing for cattle and swine, and were responsible for eradication of diseases which often meant slaughter for infected animals, a difficult job. Most food animals are now housed in huge groups, so it is no surprise that continued veterinary surveillance is critical for prevention of devastating loss should a virulent organism gain a foothold in the population.

Success has its own rewards. The implementation of these programs required more personnel, so land grant colleges and universities took over as the home of veterinary schools in this country. In North Carolina, following World War II and the enactment of the GI bill, there were more students interested in veterinary medicine as a career, but they had to seek their education out of state. As the poultry and swine industry began to grow, and with the establishment of the Research Triangle Park, the need for our own school to train veterinarians and scientists was evident. The North Carolina State College of Veterinary Medicine was established to take advantage of this void and graduated its first class in 1985. It is now ranked fourth in the nation in the quality of education it provides its veterinary students.

Those of us who have the privilege of practicing the art and science of this profession owe a great debt to the hard-working and dedicated professionals who have preceded us. There is something mystical in the relationship of people with animals. The first known drawings by men are of animals, found in caves in France. The pictures that soothe and delight children of any age are representations of animals, a striking feature of the lobby of any pediatrician.