

Editorial

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Continuing Education

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Where has veterinary medicine come from and where are we going? Veterinary Medicine has come from a mechanical profession to a science based art. As we have increased the scientific base, the consuming public and legislators have become more aware of methods for assuring continued competency. To keep pace with the rapidly expanding amount of new knowledge, all professionals have been faced with continuous education.

Mandatory continuing education has become a reality in the past ten years through state and/or federal guidelines. Twenty-two states now have regulations requiring a specified number of hours of continuing education for veterinary medical license renewal. The broad trend for mandatory continuing education will likely continue.

The question now asked is, "What's the relationship between continuing education and competence?" Legislating attendance at continuing education programs will not insure that the participants will learn. In fact,

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evidence from the medical profession suggests that current continuing education has failed to materially improve competencies and the delivery of health care.¹ It would be quite possible to accumulate 50 hours of continuing education credit per year and learn practically nothing. How many of us have attended required college courses, passed the tests, and retained next to nothing?

The value of continuing education depends on both the attitude of the attendee and the attitude and methods of the instructors. A professional that is properly motivated will learn without mandatory continuing education legislation. Proper motivation can be started in the right direction during the professional training years by a motivated teaching faculty.

The pulse of the continuing education effort falls largely on the shoulders of the educators. Continual changes are occurring among educators in teaching methods, but continuing education for the veterinarian cannot be just an extension of a sophomore or junior lecture. Course materials must be complete, but relevant to the attendee.

Therefore, the instructor must continue to motivate the audience by presenting material that interests them and keep the material relevant. The audience must feed back information to the instructor so the presentation can be improved. If these things are done, *both* the instructor and the audience will be motivated and will learn.

The entire profession must be strongly committed to the highest quality of continuing education possible by endorsing, not a single learning method, but the development of more sophisticated approaches to relevance evaluation for continued competence. Ultimately, mandatory re-examination will probably be required for relicensure or recertification. Some more palatable approaches might be to develop peer review through professional standards review

organizations, self-assessment techniques or supervisory assessments. The American Animal Hospital Association has been exploring the self-assessment techniques for the past few years. Unfortunately, successfully passing a written or oral evaluation does not guarantee competence. Knowing and doing are not necessarily the same. Additional research is needed to determine the best methods for assuring continued competency.

How can professional organizations help in the continuing education battle? The key to improved continuing educational programs is improved communication. The organization of programs must be coordinated via local, state, regional and national groups. Programs must be planned well in advance and coordinated in such a way that each person interested will have ample knowledge of each offering. Many veterinarians are not aware of the programs being offered in adjoining states.

Continuing education programs are, and will continue to be, big business. We must have the organizational framework to manage and assess the volume of formal continuing educational program offerings. Organizational efforts have been made by the AVMA through the publication of future subjects and dates in the AVMA Journal. More organizational efforts must be made on the local, state and regional levels. Each group must function as a coordinating unit and provide the following services: (1) Long-range educational goals (i.e. five year, master plan); (2) Short-term educational goals (i.e. one year course outline); (3) Means of communicating and disseminating information between planners of continuing education and potential participants; (4) Planning group that is concerned with organization and presentation of each program; and (5) An assessment group to assist with the evaluation of course offerings. In the small, local organization, all five functions could be carried out by the same group of people. Nevertheless, the challenge of each of these areas must be met.

An example of local and state groups working together is the state of Arizona. In the fall of 1970, the Arizona Veterinary Medical Association charged a group of interested veterinarians with the task of forming an Academy of Veterinary Practice with the sole purpose of coordinating,

planning and assessing continuing education offerings within the state. Arizona had three separate groups working on continuing education at that time to serve 225 practicing veterinarians. The three groups planning and developing programs were, two local associations (Central Arizona Veterinary Medical Association and Southern Arizona Veterinary Medical Association) and the Arizona Veterinary Medical Association. By 1972, the Arizona Academy of Veterinary Practice was established and representatives from the three previous organizations were members.

In 1972, a comprehensive program was mapped out for the entire year and philosophical discussions were directed toward a five year master plan. Committees were set up to plan both state and local meetings. Subject matter, types of programs (i.e. wet lab, practitioner panel, lecture, video-tapes, etc.), course dates and locations were chosen based on the input from the representatives. Each was then placed into the overall educational plan. Yearly course offerings were printed and mailed to every veterinarian in the state. Veterinarians could then plan their continuing education one year in advance. Three weeks before each offering, a detailed course outline was sent to each veterinarian as a reminder and to give the latest program details. Yearly programs were sent to the AVMA Journal for publication for all veterinarians. At the conclusion of each program, an assessment form was passed out to each participant to evaluate the program. In 1975, precourse questions were initiated so each participant could assess his knowledge of the subject prior to the course. The Academy, still very viable, is now in its seventh year and has changed slowly to meet the continuing education demands of the veterinarians.

Organizational units will differ from group to group depending on the number of participants involved, their geographic location and distribution. But again, the key to improved continuing educational programs is improved communication. Improved communication is a two-way street with both the participant and the instructor (or instructional media) involved.

REFERENCES

1. Francis, P. R.: Continuing Competence and Mandatory Continuing Education, *AVMA Continuing Education News*. III:1-2, 1976.