

Veterinary Retention and Recruitment

Issue

There is a shortage of veterinarians throughout Alberta for both companion and livestock practices. This shortage has resulted in veterinarian clinics shutting down in communities as they no longer have a veterinarian on staff contributing to economic hardship for both commercial livestock operations as well as individuals and communities who must travel or leave their communities for adequate vet care.

Background

In 2018 seven million (7,000,000) dogs visited the vet, up from 5 million (5,000,000) a decade earlier.⁷ This increase represents the increase of pet ownership in response to COVID as people sought alternative companionship due to social isolation and the increase of time available due to online work environments. With higher demand, the trending decrease of veterinarians has resulted in increased stress on an already understaffed industry.

As many more veterinarians are retiring every year than there are new graduates, this shortage is all over Alberta, Canada and other countries requiring us all to work together to find solutions that will alleviate strain immediately and long term. We are glad to see the recent expansion announcement in the budget to alleviate this strain, as "veterinarians and veterinary technologists are critical to the health of Alberta's animals, the sustainability of Alberta's communities and to the Alberta economy growing forward. Labour shortages are real, growing and pose a risk to lives and livelihoods."⁸

Location, especially rural, is an issue for this profession. If you are interested in livestock practice, it is understood that you will need to live in rural Alberta for your practice. However, you can choose to set up your practice anywhere for companion animals, and rural locations are not as attractive to professionals as they must consider lifestyle, spouses' career and children's out-of-school activities. Communities will need assistance in selling the rural community lifestyle and its advantages from large urban centres.

⁷ 2021 Peter Kuitenbrouwer December 27, "Canada's Veterinarian Shortage Is Shaping up to Be a Full-on Crisis," Macleans.ca, December 27, 2021, <https://www.macleans.ca/society/canadas-veterinarian-shortage-is-shaping-up-to-be-a-full-on-crisis/>

⁸ "The Government of Alberta's Historic Commitment to Strengthen the Veterinary Profession in Alberta Is a Positive Step Forward for Alberta's Animal Owners and Provincial Economic Growth," Alberta Animal Health Source, February 25, 2022, [https://www.albertaanimalhealthsource.ca/content/ab-government-historic-commitment-strengthen-veterinary-profession#:~:text=Budget%202022%20through%20the%20Alberta,\(UCVM\)%20for%20infrastructure%20expansion.](https://www.albertaanimalhealthsource.ca/content/ab-government-historic-commitment-strengthen-veterinary-profession#:~:text=Budget%202022%20through%20the%20Alberta,(UCVM)%20for%20infrastructure%20expansion.)

Foreign recruitment is greatly hindered by accreditation, prejudices in communities, and the cost, which can be tens of thousands of dollars to bring a veterinarian to Alberta, not to mention the worldwide shortage of veterinarians. It was easy to attract young veterinarians from English-speaking countries, but that is no longer true due to global shortages in the profession.⁹

There are two types of veterinarian schools that graduates can successfully register as Canadian Veterinarians:

1. American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education accredited schools. These schools include all Canadian, US, UK, New Zealand, and Australian schools, with a few other schools worldwide. Graduates from accredited schools need only come to Canada and write the North American Veterinary Licensing Exam (NAVLE), which all Canadian Graduates must complete in order to receive a Certificate of Qualification from the National Examining Board (NEB), which allows them to register anywhere in Canada.¹⁰
2. Non-accredited but recognized veterinary school graduates must apply to the NEB and enter an exam process (four exams) to obtain their Certificate of Qualification. A well-prepared applicant can accomplish this in 12-18 months. The first two exams are computer-based, and the last two are hands-on exams. In Alberta, once an applicant has passed the first exam indicating basic knowledge, the ABVMA will register them with a Limited License which allows them to work, earn money, and gain experience in a veterinary clinic setting while working towards completion of their exams. If other veterinarians are at the practice, this can be an excellent way to introduce newcomers to rural practice with mentorship. It is not a way to get a solo practitioner into an area.¹¹

Training and experience for foreign countries can be different than in Alberta. They can be more specialized in their fields, whereas, in Alberta, our veterinarians are more widely trained. We need to allow for this specialized training and prevent it from hindering recruitment.¹²

Registered veterinarian technologists (RVTs) are underutilized in most veterinarian clinics, leading to retention problems and overworked veterinarians. RVTs must only practice under the supervision of a veterinarian and within a veterinary practice, however, that still affords a vast range of tasks that they can perform.¹³ Many technologists leave due to pay and not doing what they are trained to do. They can be an asset as their training is quick between 18 to 24 months. When utilized at their full potential, they can save business costs, allow veterinarians to do more critical parts of their jobs, and provide better customer service for clients and their

⁹ Brooks Region Veterinarian Committee

¹⁰ Dr. Darrell Dalton, Interview

¹¹ Dr. Darrell Dalton, Interview

¹² Dr. Darrell Dalton, Interview

¹³ Dr. Darrell Dalton, Interview

animals. "Veterinary technologists are a critical part of the veterinary teams delivering services throughout Alberta communities that keep Alberta animals healthy and keep our communities healthy."¹⁴

We appreciate that through the Alberta at Work initiative, there will be a direct investment of \$59 million over three years to the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Calgary for infrastructure expansion to allow for more enrollment of new Albertan veterinarians. However, the shortage is genuine right now. We must move with actions that have solutions for now and not just in the future. We therefore recommend:

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Assist in the promotion of Rural Alberta for Companion and Livestock Veterinarian Professionals;
2. Accelerate the accreditation process for internationally trained, non-accredited veterinarians to work in Alberta; and,
3. Facilitate specialized foreign veterinarians to practice in Alberta in their specialized fields.

¹⁴ Alberta Veterinary Technologist Association, Karen Melnyk, President, ABVTA