Divide &conquer – mastering the art of delegation

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Abstract

The North American veterinary shortage is of significant concern for industry professionals and animal owners alike. The overwhelming scarcity of food animal veterinarians challenges bovine practitioners to consider actions they can take to increase theirclient capacity and service area, while ensuring there are minimal impacts on animal welfare as a result of potentially longer appointment wait times.Various studies support that the delegation of permitted tasks to credentialed veterinary technicians (CVTs) canincrease practice efficiency and revenue, while simultaneously positively influencing CVT career satisfaction and subsequent retention rate. Veterinarians can further support the implementation of CVT utilization by opening up the lines of communication within the team, working directly with the CVT to ensure they are competent and confident at the tasks at hand, and byeducating clients on the added value CVTs bring to the veterinary industry.

Keywords: veterinary, technician, delegation

Introduction

The North American veterinary workforce shortage is of significant concern for industry professionals and animal owners alike, however, there is an overwhelming need for food animal veterinarians in particular. As we continue to see annual declines in practitioners electing to work infood animal medicine, those who remain to service these species are not only faced with the impacts associated with adopting a higher volume client base, such as increased

workload and subsequent lack of emergency appointment availability, but those who participate in ambulatory medicine also have a greater geographical service area to cover. The workforce shortage calls to question the traditional practice model, where veterinarians held the sole responsibility of providing animal medical care, and determine how the workload can be distributed to incorporate more members of the veterinary team, specifically, credentialed veterinary technicians (CVTs),to increase efficiency and therefore, enable more tasks to be completed within established business hours.

Background

Terminology

The term credentialed veterinary technician (CVT/CrVT), encompasses the designations of individuals who have received a minimum of an Associate Degree (U.S.) or Diploma (Canada) in Veterinary Technology, have passed the Veterinary Technician National Exam (VTNE), and have met state or provincial veterinary regulatory requirements, as applicable. Terminology for the position varies regionally but the most common titles include Certified Veterinary Technician/Technologist (CVT), Registered Veterinary Technician/Technologist (RVT), Licensed Veterinary Technician/Technologist (LVT), and Licensed Veterinary Medical Technician/Technologist (LVMT).[1, 2]

In the United States, there is a distinct difference between the term technician and technologist specifically. To be classified as a technologist, technician's must build onto the Associate Degree achieved andcomplete their Bachelor's Degree in Veterinary Technology. Currently, Missouri is the only state whose Veterinary Practice Act recognizes the difference in credentialing between technicians and technologists. [2]

In Canada, the educational path and terminology is more succinct, only offering a diploma program in Veterinary Technology, however, they still must also successfully complete the VTNE and abide by provincial regulation. Additionally, CVTs in Canada are identified as Registered Veterinary Technologists in the provinces of Manitoba and westward, and Registered Veterinary Technician's to the east. [3]

Bovine veterinary availability in the United States

Veterinarians nationwide are familiar with the ongoing concerns surrounding the veterinary workforce shortage in all avenues of the profession, however, food animal practice is facing the brunt of the impact. According to the 2024 Veterinary Shortage Situation Map, over 650 counties across 47 states are in critical need of food animal veterinarians.[4]Furthermore, the statistics released by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)on December 31, 2023 established that of the 82,704 veterinarians in clinical practice, only 4,667 of those were employed in mixed animal practices and 3,451 were working in food animal exclusive sectors. These numbers reflect a 4.3% decrease in food animal practitioners from 2022, however, the 18.6% increase in mixed animal practitioners is a step in the right direction. [5, 7] The 2022 Census of Agricultureestimated there to be over 126 million head of cattle. When considering this number to mixed and food animal practitioners, that would equate to there being only8,118 veterinarians having the capacity to service the entire population of cattle in the country.[6]

Bovine veterinary availability in Canada

North of the border, the outlook on the production medicine industry is also bleak. The 2020 Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) Canadian Veterinary Workforce Study demonstrates that out of the ~12,517 veterinarians practicing in Canada across all sectors, only approximately 15% of veterinarians spend “some” time working with beef cattle (~1878 veterinarians), and 10% spend “some” time working with dairy cattle (~1252). [8] Although the volume of cattle in Canada is notably lower than that in the United States, at an estimated 13 million head according to the 2021 Canadian Census of Agriculture, we can still conclude there is a lack of practitioners in this sector. [9]Of greater concern is the amount of time new graduate veterinarians are spending in bovine practice. The Canadian Veterinary Workforce Study demonstrated that the amount of time new graduates spend working with cattle, beef and dairy inclusive, had decreased from roughly 30% in 2014 to 15% in 2018.[9]

Summary of veterinary availability in North America

Although Census reports in both the United States and Canada demonstrate annual decreases in both estimated cattle inventory numbers and animal agriculture operations, those who are in business still require veterinary services. The decline in active operations in conjunction with veterinarians transitioning away from food animal practice puts more pressure on those remaining to adopt a greater service area, or at the very minimum, a larger client base. Veterinarians whose practices provide ambulatory services could see significant increases in travel times, thus

leading to potentialdecreases in overall practice efficiency and revenue per veterinarian from the decline in the number of clients they can serve in a day. Perhaps the most critical point to consider is how the inability to accommodate acute or emergent appointment requests impacts animal welfare.

Financial contributions

The Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians executed a survey that evaluated the economic impact of employing credentialed veterinary technician's versus non-credentialed auxiliaries. The data reflected that approximately 25% of veterinary respondents performed CVT tasks "often or always". Core CVT tasks were established by identifyingthose that over 80% of CVT respondents reported to perform "often or always". These tasks included capturing radiographs, administering medications, patient restraint, administering anesthesia, performing diagnostic testing, executing dental prophylaxis, and assisting in surgery. Univariable associations suggested that clinics who utilized veterinarians to perform CVT tasks had less annual revenue per veterinarian. Additionally, clinics who were more dependent on non-credentialed auxiliaries to perform CVT tasks also had lower annual revenues, regardless of the higher vet-to-non-CVT ratio.Researchers suggested that, although non-credentialed auxiliaries are still a valuable part of the veterinary team, the additional education and credentialling processes CVT's have undergonelikely contributes to increased efficiency and revenue. [10]

Approach

Veterinary Technology institutions and regulatory bodies alike emphasize that there are five categories of veterinary medicine that CVT's are not permitted to execute and those are diagnosing, prognosing, developing treatment plans, prescribing, and performing surgical procedures. Fortunately, states and provinces who regulate the profession of CVTs commonly provide a more comprehensive list of tasks that can be delegated, along with the appropriate level of supervision required. It is perhaps just as critical to be aware of the level of veterinary supervision mandated for the task as it is to know the task itself. The levels of supervision are defined as immediate, which demands a veterinarian be within audible and visual range of the CVT performing the task, direct, where the veterinarian would be on the premises, and indirect, in which the veterinarian would not be on the premises, however, would be

reachable remotely.[11, 12]It is important to recognize in scenarios where the supervision level is indirect that the veterinarian is still fully responsible for the treatment protocol and outcome of the case.

Outcome

Benefits for the DVM

When considering how to appropriately distribute tasks amongst the veterinary team, it is important for the DVM to do so in a way that allocates the maximum amount of time plausible to them to perform veterinary-specific tasks: medicine, surgery, consulting. Additionally, distribution of the workload also has the potential to minimize some of the impacts associated with burnout, such as exhaustion. The 2023 Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study IV demonstrated a few key areas of concern within the veterinary population. Univariable results concluded 82% of veterinarians experience levels of low-medium burnout, which is similar to the general population (84%), however, when evaluating exhaustion, 61% of veterinarians exhibit higher levels of exhaustion versus the general population (32%). Further evaluating burnout by age demographic reported a significant difference between the severity in those aged 18-34 versus 55-64 in particular. According to the study, 17.3% of veterinarians in the 18-34 age range experience severe psychological distress as a result of burnout, as opposed to 6% in those aged 55-64. The data suggests that CVTs may serve as a critical piece of the puzzle in regard to mitigating the impacts of exhaustion, burnout and other mental health challenges. [13]

Benefits for the CVT

According to the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) 2022 Demographic Survey, approximately 20% of CVTs reported that their skills were not being utilized in practice. Additionally, another 41% responded that although they were permitted to perform some tasks within their scope, they still were not practicing to their fullest potential. The survey also determined that only 27% of respondents felt extremely satisfied with their career. Additional findings were that only 51.3% reported wanting to stay in the career of veterinary technology; however, the average career length for a CVT is only 6.1 years.Although there are multiple factors that play into overall workplace satisfaction, salary being of primary concern, underutilization is still a significantconsideration and is something that can be addressed in real time. [14]

Benefits for the Practice

Distribution of the workload is not only beneficial to the veterinarian as an individual, but the practice as a whole.As previously discussed, proper delegation of permitted competencies to CVTs has the potential to increase practice efficiency, which could also positively influence appointment availability and decrease wait times. From a financial standpoint, the "Contributions of veterinary technicians to veterinary business revenue" study published in the American Veterinary Medical Association journal (JAVMA) in 2010 states that practices saw an average increase in revenue of $93,311 USD for each additional CVT per veterinarian. [15]Furthermore, an OAVT study titled, "Exploring the value that RVTs bring to Ontario companion animal practices" simultaneously quantifies the financial gains associated with CVT employment and support higher minimum wages for CVTs. The report states CVTs who made over $21 CAD per hour increased gross annual revenue by an average of $122,342 CAD per veterinarian. This may in turn help increase CVT job satisfaction and improve retention rate. Single veterinarian practices experienced the most significant increase in gross annual revenue *(p = 0.0001).* The data in multi-veterinarian practices was not statistically significant, however, trended similarly to smaller practice models. Similarly to the JAVMA study, the OAVT study alsoreported that the number of CVTs per full-time veterinarian significantly increased revenue *(p = <0.0001).*According to their data, for each CVT employed per veterinarian, they saw a gross annual revenue of $79,118 CAD per veterinarian. [10]

For those veterinarians who would consider increasing their hours over hiring a CVT, the 2020 AVMA Practice Owner survey indicated that a 10% increase in vet hours worked per week would only increase revenue by approximately 9%. Conversely, for each hour a CVT worked to support a veterinarian there was a 20.5% increase in revenue. [16] Not only does this research support the role of CVTs, but it also discourages veterinarians from working more hours and potentially impacting their personal mental and physical health.

Application

According to research, the top three barriers to improved utilization of CVTs can be narrowed down to 1) lack of confidence by the DVM, 2) inefficient utilization of uncredentialed staff as opposed to CVTs, and 3) DVM

unwillingness to relinquish control. In order to successfully incorporate CVTs into your practice model, it is important to first address the veterinary team as a whole. Management must establish which competencies, according to regulatory guidelines, if not all, the veterinarians are comfortable delegating to CVTs. Careful consideration must be taken to evaluate the day-to-day operations of the practice to determine which areas are in critical need of assistance. Once this has been established, all members of the team, including administrative staff, should be informed of any changesor potential protocols that need to be put into place to streamline the scheduling or staff distribution processes. Lastly, the responsibilities which fall onto CVTs need to be communicated clearly to avoid delays and missteps. Secondarily, the working relationship between the DVM and CVT should be collaborative in nature. To improve comfortability within the DVM and CVT, it is important to ensure that the CVT is exposed to the work enough to become familiar with their responsibilities and what is expected of them. Accommodationgoes hand-in-hand with exposure. DVMs should be allowing CVTs the opportunity to perform the competency enough to feel confident in it and be able to execute the skill ata level comparable to that of a veterinarian. Enabling CVTs to integrate their education to practice and further develop their understanding and application of duties requires DVMs to invest time into the training and protocol development process. Following adequate training, DVMs should trust that their CVTs are competent and knowledgeable, and that they can execute the tasks at the required caliber. Similarly, CVTs should respect the role of the DVMand practice only within their scope. Lastly, client comfortability is of utmost importance. Prior to performing any procedure, whether executed by a DVM or CVT,informed consent must be obtained. The role of a CVT is still unfamiliar within the industry itself, let alone to the general public, so it is not only important to introduce the CVT to the client personally, but also as their title per their jurisdiction. The client should feel not only comfortable with the care being provided, but with the caregivers providing it. It is important that the DVM support the capabilities of all members of their team, including CVTs, and are enthusiastic about endorsing their contributions to the profession.

Conclusion

The bovine veterinary shortage is one that will likely be of critical concern for the foreseeable future. As advocates for bovine health and welfare, and the animal agriculture industry as a whole, we have to utilize the professionals who continue to make the conscious decision to serve this sector, including CVTs. Distribution of the workload will not only encourage practice efficiency in the face of overwhelming client demand, but it will decrease concerns

around animal welfare impacts associated with prolonged appointment wait times.Studies support that hiring a CVT and permitting them to practice to their fullest capacity is more financially beneficial than both employing higher numbers of non-credentialled staff and working longer hours as a veterinarian.Finally, CVTs are knowledgeable and highly trained professionals. CVTs are not looking to replace veterinarians but to support them by doing the job they are educated to do.

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