

2009 Legislative Support from Pre-Veterinary Club at Montana State University

Jessica Hudson – Student Testimony

Good morning Chairperson and Committee Members. My name is Jessica Hudson. I am from a ranch in Hamilton, Montana. As a junior at Montana State University studying animal science, I applied to veterinary school this last fall. I am here with supporting members of the MSU Pre-Veterinary Club to discuss the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Professional School Exchange Program. On behalf of the other pre-veterinary students at MSU-Bozeman, as well as our advisor Dr. Rebecca Mattix, I thank you for the opportunity to speak today and to extend our gratitude for your continued support of the nine current positions available. Today, we will be presenting a brief history of the WICHE program, the need for veterinarians in the state of Montana, and the current economic concerns.

The WICHE program has provided students of the western region an opportunity to affordably attend professional schools since 1953. Through the WICHE program around 23,000 students have participated in the program in professional, undergraduate, and graduate exchange programs. Currently the WICHE program is saving the 15 member states, students, and parents about \$137.7 million throughout all WICHE programs (Montana State Highlights). WICHE makes attending a professional school possible for the West, without this program professional school is an unrealistic goal for a lot of people. This unrealistic goal is due to the economic status of attending a professional school and paying out of state tuition, but also the large amount of competition in the out of area category for each professional school. On average it costs around \$36,000 per year to attend veterinary school, therefore in four years it will cost the average person \$142,000 in tuition dollars alone. Plus without the WICHE program all Montana Students are put into the category of out of area with everyone else applying out side of the state. On average for the class of 2012 there were 563 out of area applicants and an average of 28 of those applicants were accepted into a veterinary school. This makes getting into a veterinary school extremely tough. However, with the WICHE program nine students from Montana are funded each year and are placed in a separate Montana category so, Montana students are competing for nine funded spots. This makes getting into a veterinary school more accessible for Montana students. I have compiled a chart that includes the cost of attendance for out of state residents, the number of out of state applicants, and the number of out of state students accepted to each veterinary school.

Thank you very much for your time and attention; it is my pleasure to introduce Jesse Olsen, who will provide some information on the need for veterinarians in the state of Montana.

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Auburn University	32,924		10
Massachusetts	36,190	722	40
Colorado State University	41,407.00	1267	29
Alabama	12,000		41
Cornell University	35,000		35
U.C. Davis	36,121	490	8
Iowa Sate University	36,246	386	45
Florida	39,376	573	15
Kansas State university	37,400	920	55
Georgia	36,696	232	1
Louisiana State University	34,500.00	507	20
Illinois	34,704		30
Michigan State university	39,498	617	35
Minnesota	39,357	916	36
Mississippi State University	30,946.00	330	30
Missouri	30,684	462	20
North Carolina State University	33,343.00	335	18
Pennsylvania	35,632		56
Ohio State University	55,234		38
Tennessee	38,656	613	20
Oklahoma State University	30,500	306	20
Wisconsin	24,913	722	20
Oregon State Univesity	31,987		8
Virginia Tech	38,270	543	10
Purdue University	50,500	636	30
Washington	42,400	599	23
Texas A&M University	23,769	90	10
California	36,310		100
		# of Out of	
	Cost	Area	# Accepted
Average	35,520	563.3	28.6785714
Average Total for 4 Years	142,080		

Jesse Olsen – Student Testimony

Thank you Jessica, Mr.(s.) Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Jesse Olsen. I was one of many students enrolled in the pre-veterinary program at MSU-Bozeman and am currently working to complete my masters there as well. I too am awaiting response for this application year.

I would like to express my greatest appreciation for the opportunity to speak before this committee. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues, Miss Hudson and Miss Anderson. The efforts and support from these students, as well as, the rest of the Pre-veterinary students (Please Stand) are greatly appreciated.

It is obvious that the WICHE program does not only make it affordable for Montana students to gain higher education, but it also makes higher education far more accessible. As opposed to a less than 1% (6) chance and a total cost of \$226,000 (3), a 36% (5) acceptance rate at a cost of \$114,000 (3) under WICHE sponsorship helps qualified Montana students not only afford veterinary school, but also allows them to return to Montana for practice. Sponsorship is not a free ride. Through this support, the loyalty of WICHE graduates has shown an excellent return of state investment. Eighty-four percent of WICHE sponsored students have returned to WICHE states and 56% have returned to Montana to practice (2). Sponsored WICHE graduates constitute 9 out of 10 veterinarians serving the Butte area, 3 of 3 serving the Malta area, and 3 of 4 serving the Miles City area. Dr. Richard Cunningham, a WICHE sponsored WSU graduate, has been the only veterinarian serving Hysham community going on 30 years. He has recently taken on a WICHE sponsored 2008 graduate as an apprentice; Nicholas Sorenson, a Belgrade native. This is a great example of the programs ability to alleviate limited access in rural areas.

The question must then be asked: "What is the job market like for Montana veterinarians"? Dr. Mark E. Mattix, former MVMA President and advisor to WICHE, stated that there is an impending crisis for veterinary practitioners in the rural west. After tallying the Montana listings of a 2008 American Veterinary Medical Association Directory, I found that 57% of the veterinarians in these listings graduated in 1988 or earlier (2). Even more astounding, 74% of Montana's food animal predominant veterinarians are also twenty years or greater out of vet school (2). According to a WICHE professional employment projection study, there would be a 28% increase in veterinarian positions available from year 2002 to 2012 (4). Taken together, this indicates that there will be a greater need for veterinarians in Montana's future.

Take a poll of any of these students behind me today, and you will find that they come from communities, large and small, all over the state, with a variety of backgrounds and goals in veterinary medicine. As for myself, I was raised on a small ranch outside of Molt, MT and plan to study large animal medicine once accepted into veterinary school. This is my third attempt to gain WICHE support, as without it, returning to the state for rural practice would not be feasible. Upon completion, I will stay true and return to Montana for a career of practice.

With the scarcity of rural practitioners and the economics we have presented, I urge the committee to be conscious of the relationships between veterinary medicine, Montana's agricultural-livestock industry, and current animal and public health issues.

I will now hand the podium over to Miss Makensie Anderson who will shed some light on the economics from a student's perspective.

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Makensie Anderson – Student Testimony

Thank you Jesse and good morning ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak before the committee today. My name is Makensie Anderson and I was born and raised in Helena, Montana with close ties to the agricultural industries. I am now a senior at Montana State University where I will be receiving my bachelor's degree in Biotechnology this spring. I am also currently in the process of applying to Veterinary Schools through the WICHE Program. Once I have completed Veterinary school, I plan to return to Montana and begin a mixed practice, which will be possible thanks to the support of the WICHE Program.

As Jesse pointed out, there is an increasing need for Veterinarians in Montana. The increasing need is not only due to retiring Veterinarians, but also due to the number one commodity in Montana being cattle and calves.³ This industry generated approximately a billion dollars in farm receipts, which comprises 41.0% of the state's total farm receipts in 2007.³ According to an article in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, throughout Montana there are 11 counties without any food animal veterinarians, 5 of which have over 25,000 food animals.² This means there are no veterinarians to aid in pregnancy checking, vaccinating, calving, and any other emergency or disease control situation. In order to maintain the cattle industry, the services of veterinary practices must be available. Subsequently, these veterinarians need affordable education in order to return and practice in Montana.

The need for affordable education for Montana Veterinarians can be justified due to the average income of Montana Veterinarians being lower than the average income in other states. Stated in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, the starting salary of 2008 graduates of U.S. veterinary medical schools was \$62,500 (\$62,424) per year.⁴ By comparison, the average annual salary for a veterinarian practicing in Montana is \$56,000 (\$55,929) per year.⁸ The WICHE program allows for affordable education and the opportunity to return to practice in Montana. According to the survey of 2008 graduates, 58.1% of students graduated with a debt load between \$80,000 and \$170,000 and the average debt-to-earnings ratio is nearly 2:1.^{4,5} Of the 2,346 graduates polled, just under 8% or 187 students left veterinary school with over \$200,000 in debt.⁴ Without the WICHE funding, the probability of a student returning to Montana is much less feasible due to the average loan burden being too high.

The WICHE program helps many students afford Veterinary School. According to the 2008 WICHE statistical report, there were a total of 39 students sponsored by WICHE from 2001-2005.⁷ Of the 39 sponsored students, 56% of them returned to Montana to begin a practice bringing revenue and added jobs to Montana's economy.⁷ A total of 504 DVM's practice in the state, of these 59% graduated from a WICHE School.^{1,6} With just over 21% retiring within the next 5 years, the 9 WICHE spots are well in need for Montana students to have a chance to return to practice.⁶

Due to the increased demand for veterinarians additional jobs they bring to communities, their vitality to agricultural economics, and the loyal return of previous WICHE veterinarians, we hope for your continued support for the 9 WICHE supported students. We appreciate your time and continued support, and we would be happy to answer any of your questions or concerns?

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Top Commodities, Exports, and Counties

Top 5 agriculture commodities, 2007

	Value of receipts thousand \$	Percent of state total farm receipts	Percent of US value
1. Cattle and calves	981,051	41.0	2.0
2. Wheat	819,477	34.2	7.7
3. Barley	104,454	4.4	16.0
4. Hay	94,773	4.0	1.5
5. Dairy products	61,149	2.6	0.2
All commodities	2,394,306		0.8
<p>More information on Montana's top agriculture commodities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading commodities for cash receipts in Excel • Contact Roger Strickland, 202-694-5592. 			

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Total DVM's in the state	468	
Total DVM's by WICHE school	252	53.85%
Total DVM's in large animal	246	52.56%
Total large animal in practice for >20 years	146	59.35%
Total responses of WICHE Survey	154	
Total WICHE sponsored	76	49.35%
# of responses who feel current # of WICHE spots are not adequate	51	33.12%
# of responses who will be or are retired in the next five years	33	21.43%
TOTAL WICHE STUDENTS SUPPORTED SINCE 1993	74	
TOTAL WICHE STUDENTS RETURNED TO MONTANA SINCE 1993	29	40%

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STUDENT



Why it's your problem, too

The health and future of the profession depend on all stakeholders, but the first step is to increase practice earnings. Which means private practitioners must be willing to take action.

BY KAREN E. FELSTED, CPA, MS, DVM, CVT

The bottom line

No magic bullet, but solutions are out there

There are a number of ways the profession can address the issue of rising student debt:

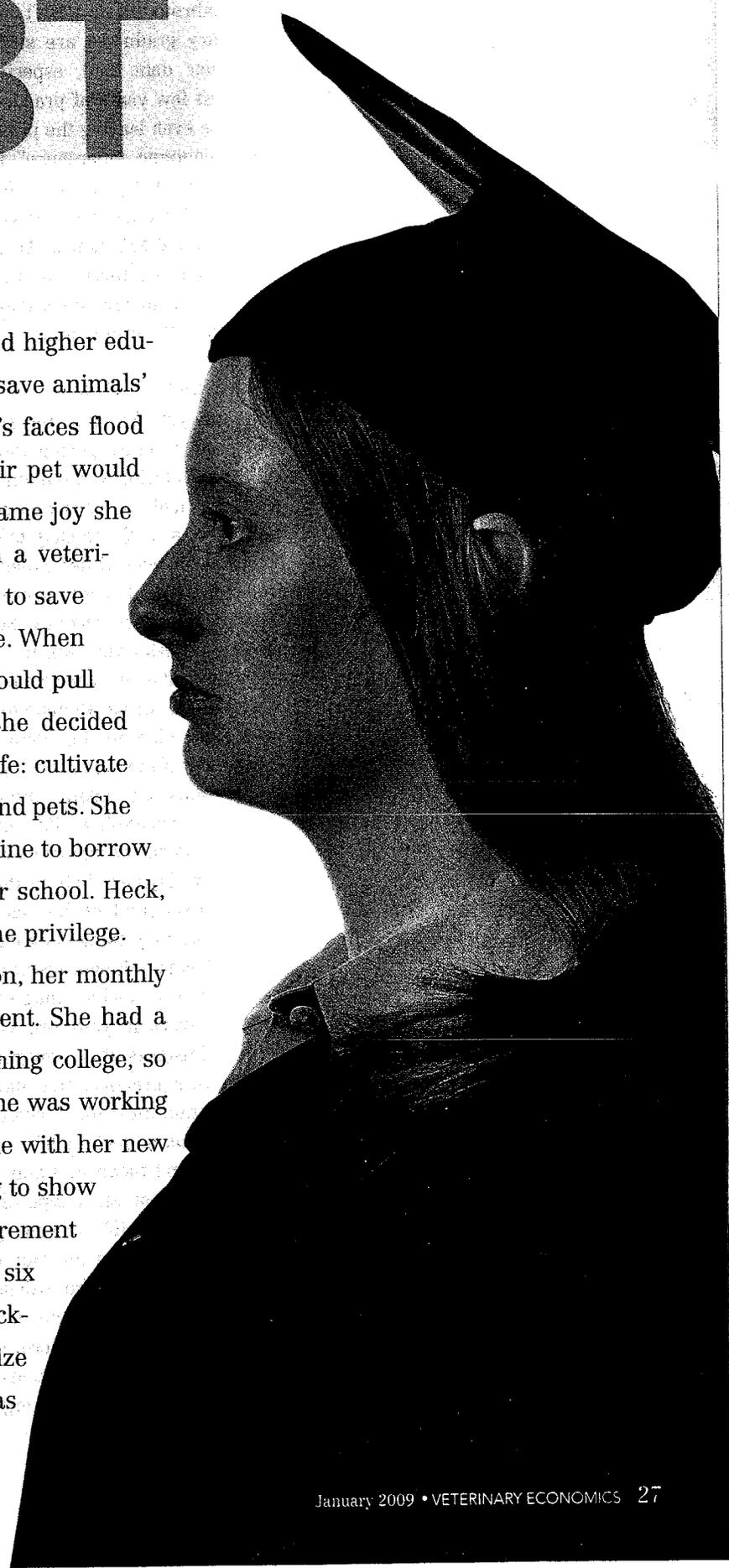
- > Increase earnings through better business practices.
- > Prepare students to practice with high productivity.
- > Look for ways to hold the line on tuition costs.

DEBT

Wendy Labrousse entered higher education with a dream. She wanted to save animals' lives. She wanted to watch children's faces flood with relief when they found out their pet would survive. She wanted to spread the same joy she experienced in her own past, when a veterinarian labored throughout the night to save her puppy after it ingested antifreeze. When the weary doctor told her the dog would pull through, her passion ignited and she decided what she was going to do with her life: cultivate this beautiful bond between people and pets. She didn't hesitate to sign on the dotted line to borrow hundreds of thousands of dollars for school. Heck, she would have done anything for the privilege.

Then reality set in. After graduation, her monthly loan payment was more than her rent. She had a newborn baby and a husband finishing college, so she was the primary wage earner. She was working 60 hours a week, missing out on time with her new daughter, and still there was nothing to show for it at the end of the month. No retirement savings. No financial security. Despite six years of education, she had a paycheck-to-paycheck existence. "I didn't realize the implications of my debt until I was living with it," she says. ▶

Photos by Mark McDonald





Dr. Wendy Labrousse, shown here with her Boston terrier, Baby, radically changed her spending habits to manage her student debt payments and provide for her family. She now owns a practice owner in Coos Bay, Ore.

\$120,000

Average debt of a 2008 U.S. veterinary college graduate

90%

Percentage of veterinary college graduates who leave school with debt

\$61,518

Average starting salary of a 2008 graduate entering private practice

Almost 2:1

Average debt-to-earnings ratio for 2008 graduates (the rule of thumb is not to borrow more than your first year's salary—a 1:1 ratio)

Source: JAVMA, Oct. 1, 2008

Dr. Labrousse's story isn't unusual. Veterinary graduates are struggling with their debt load, especially in their first few years of practice, and some are even leaving the profession (see "Economic emergency" in the April 2008 *DVM Newsmagazine*). As Dr. Ron DeHaven, executive vice president of the AVMA, notes, "There are some challenges there if we're going to continue to attract the best and the brightest to the profession."

The issues at stake

Some analysts fear that the student debt issue is endangering the very future of veterinary medicine. And when you look at the statistics (see the figures at left), it's easy to share their nervousness. Other experts believe student debt is not the crisis it's been portrayed as recently. So, depending on who you talk to, either this is the end of veterinary medicine as we know it, or we all need to calm down and look at the big picture.

But even if they disagree, at least these groups are talking about the issues. There are some folks—mostly private practice veterinarians whose loan payoff days are behind them—who don't see student debt as their problem, so they think they can ignore it. This is a dangerous attitude. If you will ever need a young veterinarian to work in your practice or buy your business, this is your issue. A job at your practice, or a stake in its ownership, must make economic sense in a young doctor's life.

That doesn't mean that you, as a practice owner or other type of employer, are responsible for solving the student debt problem on your own. Change needs to come from all stakeholders—students, academic institutions, federal and state governments, and professional organizations, as well as the employers of young veterinarians. However, private prac-

tioners are uniquely positioned to increase earnings. If the profession is to survive and thrive, average salaries must increase, and private practitioners must help drive this change.

The current low "market rate" for veterinarians is heavily influenced by private practices' cost structure and profitability. And many practices are simply not profitable—even if they provide a good living for their owners. If these practices were run more efficiently, not only would the owners make more, but young veterinarians would earn more: Changes in pricing, staff leverage, and business systems would let them be more productive.

Skyrocketing education costs

In the last four years, the cost of a veterinary education has risen dramatically—about 31 percent for tuition, fees, books, and equipment, according to the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC). The change in the consumer price index, a gauge of the cost of living, was about 16 percent for the same period. Interestingly, room and board, personal expenses, transportation, and healthcare costs for veterinary students have risen as quickly as tuition, according to the AAVMC—31 percent in four years. What's more, the interest charged on student loans has increased, and it's become more difficult to obtain a loan in the first place.

Of course, none of this is taking place in a vacuum—universities don't raise tuition and fees for the fun of it. The reality is that many veterinary programs are facing declining budgets. For example, in 2007, federal and state funding to the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine was cut by more than \$1 million. This is not uncommon, and the choices raised are difficult: Cut faculty? Eliminate programs? Raise tuition? No alternative is attractive. ▶

COVER STORY

Improve efficiency and productivity in practice. Boosting young veterinarians' earnings does not mean current practice owners simply hand over a greater share of the business profits while receiving nothing in return. But it does mean owners and employees need to focus on improving efficiency and productivity. For example, leveraging staff through additional training allows the doctors in the practice to see more patients in a day. This raises revenue without incurring a lot of additional costs. If associate pay is either directly or indirectly related to production, their compensation will increase because they're seeing more cases per day.

What's more, the practice owner's bottom line will also increase significantly. If associates are paid 20 percent of production, owners keep 80 percent of the additional revenue related to the increased caseload—less, of course, direct costs such as drugs and medical supplies. Any strategy that allows doctors to see more cases is a win-win for both the practice and the associates. Both the Brakke Management and Behavior Study and the AVMA-Pfizer Business Practices Study demonstrate the link between better business practices and increased earnings. For example, in the Pfizer-AVMA study, the difference in annual earnings between veterinarians who regularly reviewed their financial data and those who didn't was \$42,570. The difference between practices with strong employee development programs and those without was \$34,470.

Prepare students better. A veterinary education must provide students with the medical, business, and life skills necessary to be more practice-ready when they graduate. This type of training has dramatically increased in the last 10 years, but there's still room for improvement. Some schools

Management tools

Resources to build productivity

> Management education is available at all larger **continuing education meetings**.

> The National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues offers free benchmarking tools and other management resources at ncvei.org.

> An archive of management articles from *Veterinary Economics* and *DVM Newsmagazine* is available at dvm360.com.

> Management consultants can be researched and contacted through avpmca.org.

> AAHA offers a variety of resources at aahanet.org.

have developed innovative programs, such as the fourth-year elective offered by Louisiana State University's School of Veterinary Medicine in conjunction with the School of Business. In this course, students evaluate local practices and gain hands-on experience in practice economics and management.

Of course, students must take advantage of these opportunities, both in school and after graduation. There is much a young doctor can do to be productive even in a practice with owners who haven't updated their business systems as much as they should have. For example, new graduates can focus on delegating to technicians and assistants, which will enable them to see more patients. They should also focus on building strong relationships with the clients they see. One way to do this is to call back every client a day or so after they were seen to find out how the pet is doing and see if the owner has any questions.

Boost student confidence. Twenty years ago, about 15 percent of graduating veterinarians went on to

do internships; in 2008, almost 40 percent did so. Many of these students have no intent to pursue specialization but feel they need an additional year of supervised training before entering the job market. Why this shift in attitude? And what can be done in the veterinary curriculum to give students more confidence? These are questions worth exploring. It should also be noted that a year spent in an internship program exacerbates the debt issue—intern pay is less than half of the average starting salary for private practice employment, and while student debt payments can be deferred for this year, interest accrues on the debt.

Create realistic workload expectations. Young veterinarians must also have reasonable expectations about the hours they need to work in order to justify a higher salary. It's not reasonable to expect everyone to work 60 hours a week, but do highly paid professionals in other fields work only 45 hours—the average for non-owner private practice veterinarians? Increasing efficiency will help increase associate compensation, but there is a strong correlation in any field between production, compensation, and hours worked.

Increase government advocacy. While higher education costs are no doubt a reality in the same way that healthcare and energy eat up more of our budgets, stabilizing tuition costs is essential. This is particularly important and yet increasingly difficult with the troubled economy. Dr. Marguerite Pappaioanou, executive director of the AAVMC, says that while veterinary college deans are actively seeking additional sources of funding, the profession must also advocate for better public funding of veterinary education.

One program for which the AVMA and AAVMC have lobbied extensively is the Veterinary Medicine

COVER STORY

However, these realities aren't isolated to veterinary medicine. Read about student debt in the journals or Web sites of any other profession, and you'll see our concerns mirrored. For example, while veterinary student debt increased 70 percent from 2000 to 2007, dental student debt increased 79 percent. A fundamental shift is occurring in the cost of education in all fields. A report by the U.S. education secretary notes with concern that "college costs ... have outpaced inflation for the past two decades and have made affordability an ever-growing worry for students, families, and policymakers."

Paltry income levels

The difference, of course, between veterinary medicine and other professions is low veterinary income. While earnings have increased significantly in the past 10 years, they're still much lower than other professions with similar educational requirements and skills (see the

chart below). But these figures don't tell the whole story. While the average 2007 salary of a full-time private practice veterinarian, according to the 2009 AVMA Report on Veterinary Compensation, is \$115,447, owners of private practices earn much more—an average of \$146,374. Twenty-five percent of private practice owners make more than \$187,000, and 10 percent make more than \$285,500.

So managing student debt payments on average earnings might be difficult, but it's clearly possible for veterinarians to make significantly more. Practice owners can not only manage student debt, they can also achieve the things most people want in life: home ownership, a comfortable lifestyle, and the financial wherewithal to raise a family. "I think we need to take a broader viewpoint, to look beyond just the total-debt-to-starting-salaries cash flow issue," says Dr. John Tait, AAHA's president-elect. "Debt must be weighed against the long-term career options a degree in veterinary medicine brings."

However, these long-term career options still need to include increased earnings. Private practices' low-profitability problem, which is being documented by a growing

body of anecdotal evidence, restricts practices' ability to pay not only associates but also owners and support staff. Many studies have highlighted the need for better business practices in veterinary hospitals. If we adopt these practices, they will help boost average earnings to the levels enjoyed by the most successful people in our profession—and in others.

The solutions

While there are many thorny deep-rooted factors that feed into the issue of rising student debt and much we still need to learn about causes and potential solutions, there's one area where we as a profession have a great deal of control: veterinary earnings. If practices become more profitable, they will have more money to pay associates. The good news is that almost 75 percent of U.S. veterinarians work in private practice, and the vast majority of these businesses are owner-operated, which means veterinarians control their own destiny—they can increase earnings without having to deal with corporate bureaucracy. Here are some of the ways the profession can increase earnings and address the student debt issue:

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Average salaries

VETERINARY ECONOMICS

Veterinary earnings compared

This graph shows veterinarians' average 2007 salaries along with those of other healthcare professionals.

Veterinarian	\$84,090
Optometrist	\$101,840
Dentist	\$147,010
Family physician	\$153,640

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Debt forum

Symposium tackles "the elephant"

The second "Elephant in the Room" forum on veterinary student debt takes place this month, Jan. 19, at the North American Veterinary Conference. The session, a joint effort of NAVC and VetPartners (formerly the Association of Veterinary Practice Management Consultants and Advisors) will tap the collective insight of industry leaders, academic experts, veterinary practitioners, consultants, and students to generate solutions for the benefit of veterinary medicine as a profession. For more information, visit navc.org/navc-conference/program/elephant-in-the-room.



COMFORTIS™

(spinosad)

Chewable Tablets

Brief Summary: Before using Comfortis chewable tablets, please consult the product insert, a summary of which follows:

Caution: Federal (USA) law restricts this drug to use by or on the order of a licensed veterinarian.

Dosage:

Administer orally once monthly. Administer with food for maximum effectiveness. Recommended dose range is 13.5 - 27.3 mg/lb (30-60 mg/kg). Available in five tablet sizes for dogs ranging from 5 to 120 lbs. Dogs over 120 lbs should be administered the appropriate combination of tablets.

Indications:

COMFORTIS chewable tablets kill fleas and are indicated for the prevention and treatment of flea infestations (*Ctenocephalides felis*) on dogs for one month.

Contraindications:

There are no known contraindications for the use of COMFORTIS chewable tablets.

Warnings:

Not for human use. Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children.

Precautions:

COMFORTIS chewable tablets are for use in dogs and puppies 14 weeks of age and older (see ANIMAL SAFETY).

Use with caution in breeding females (see ANIMAL SAFETY). Use with caution in dogs with pre-existing epilepsy (see ADVERSE REACTIONS). The safe use of COMFORTIS chewable tablets in breeding males has not been evaluated.

Adverse Reactions:

In a well-controlled US field study, which included a total of 470 dogs (330 dogs treated with COMFORTIS chewable tablets and 140 dogs treated with an active control), no serious adverse reactions were observed with COMFORTIS chewable tablets. All reactions were regarded as mild and did not result in any dog being removed from the study.

Over the 90-day study period, all observations of potential adverse reactions were recorded. Reactions that occurred at an incidence > 1% within any of the 3 months of observation are presented in the following table. The most frequently reported adverse reaction in dogs in the COMFORTIS chewable tablets and active control groups was vomiting. The occurrence of vomiting, most commonly within 48 hours after treatment, decreased with repeated doses of COMFORTIS chewable tablets.

Percentage of Dogs (%) with Adverse Reactions

	Month 1		Month 2		Month 3	
	COMFORTIS Chewable Tablets (N=330)	Active Control (N=139)	COMFORTIS Chewable Tablets (N=282)	Active Control (N=124)	COMFORTIS Chewable Tablets (N=260)	Active Control (N=128)
Vomiting	12.7	12.2	7.8	3.2	5.8	4.8
Decreased Appetite	3.1	5.0	2.8	1.6	1.9	0.8
Lethargy	7.8	5.0	3.5	4.0	1.2	0.8
Diarrhea	6.7	5.0	4.3	0.9	1.2	0.0
Cough	3.9	5.0	0.4	2.4	0.0	0.0
Polydipsia	2.4	1.4	0.7	0.0	0.4	0.0
Vocalization	1.8	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0
Increased Appetite	1.5	0.0	0.4	0.8	0.4	0.0
Erythema	1.5	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0
Hyperactivity	1.2	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0
Excessive Salivation	1.2	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0

* This number (n=139) is less than the total number of dogs in the safety population for the active control group (n=140) because one dog joined the study late and was only dosed at Month 3.

In US and European field studies, no dogs experienced seizures when dosed with COMFORTIS chewable tablets at the therapeutic dose range of 13.5-27.3 mg/lb (30-60 mg/kg), including 4 dogs with pre-existing epilepsy. Four epileptic dogs that received higher than the maximum recommended dose of 27.3 mg/lb (60 mg/kg) experienced at least one seizure within the week following the second dose of COMFORTIS chewable tablets, but no seizures following the first and third doses. The cause of the seizures observed in the field studies could not be determined.

Animal Safety:

COMFORTIS chewable tablets were tested in pure and mixed breeds of healthy dogs in well-controlled clinical and laboratory studies. No dogs were withdrawn from the field studies due to treatment-related adverse reactions. In a dose tolerance study, COMFORTIS chewable tablets were administered orally to adult Beagle dogs at average doses of up to 100 mg/kg once daily for 10 consecutive days (16.7 times the maximum recommended monthly dose). Vomiting was seen in 5 of 6 treated dogs during the first 6 days of treatment, usually within 2.5 hours of dosing. Treated females lost weight early in the treatment period, but their weights were similar to control dogs by the end of the 24-day study. COMFORTIS chewable tablets were not associated with any clinically significant changes in hematology, blood coagulation or urinalysis parameters; however, mild elevations in ALT occurred in all dogs treated with COMFORTIS chewable tablets. By day 24, ALT values had returned to near baseline levels. Phospholipidosis (vacuolation) of the lymphoid tissue, the long-term effects of which are unknown, was seen in all dogs treated with COMFORTIS chewable tablets.

In a margin of safety study, COMFORTIS chewable tablets were administered orally to 6-week-old Beagle puppies at average doses of 1.5, 4.4, and 7.4 times the maximum recommended dose at 28-day intervals over a 6-month period. Vomiting was observed across all groups, including the control. Increased vomiting was observed at elevated doses, usually within 1 hour following administration. Vomiting at all doses decreased over time and stabilized when puppies were 14 weeks of age. The average daily and total weight gains of treated dogs were smaller than control dogs and were dose dependent. COMFORTIS chewable tablets were not associated with clinically significant changes in hematology, clinical chemistry, coagulation or urinalysis parameters. Phospholipidosis (vacuolation) of the lymphoid tissue was seen in some dogs in the 4.4X group and all dogs in the 7.4X group. The long term effects of phospholipidosis are unknown. Treatment with COMFORTIS chewable tablets was not associated with any other clinically significant adverse clinical observations, gross necropsy or histopathological changes.

In a reproductive safety study, COMFORTIS chewable tablets were administered orally to female Beagles at 1.3 and 4.4 times the maximum recommended therapeutic dose every 28 days prior to mating, during gestation, and during a six-week lactation period. No treatment-related adverse effects were noted for conception rates in the dams or for mortality, body temperature, necropsy, or histopathology findings for the dams or puppies. One dam from each treatment group experienced early pregnancy loss and one additional high dose dam aborted late term. The treated dams experienced more vomiting, especially at one hour post-dose, than the control dams. Puppies from dams treated at 1.3 times the maximum recommended therapeutic dose had lower body weights than puppies from control dams. Although puppy mortality between treated and control dams was not different, the puppies from the treated dams experienced more lethargy (4.4X group only), dehydration, weakness and felt cold to the touch (4.4X group only) than puppies from control dams.

A pilot study without a control group was conducted to analyze milk from three lactating dogs treated with an experimental formulation of spinosad at 1.5 times the maximum recommended dose administered at day 28 of gestation and 24 hours prior to parturition. The data demonstrated that spinosads were excreted in the milk of these dogs. Mortality and morbidity were greatest in puppies from the dam with the highest spinosads level in milk. The spinosad milk: reference plasma exposure ratio calculated from this study ranged from 2.2 to 3.5.

In well-controlled field studies, COMFORTIS chewable tablets were administered safely in conjunction with other frequently used veterinary products, such as vaccines, anthelmintics, antibiotics, steroids, flea and tick control products, anesthetics, NSAIDs, antihistamines, alternative/herbal remedies, shampoos, and prescription diets. Changes in hematology, clinical chemistry and urinalysis values were compared pre-and post-study and were unremarkable.

Storage Information:

Store at 20-25°C (68-77°F), excursions permitted between 15 to 30°C (59 to 86°F).

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Loan Repayment Program, which would partially forgive the loans of graduates who work in underserved areas. Another federal initiative is the Veterinary Student Day program, planned by the Student American Veterinary Medical Association Government Affairs Committee for early this year in Washington, D.C. In this program, two veterinary students from each of the 28 U.S. veterinary colleges will be introduced to the legislative process, learn about policy issues facing the veterinary profession, lobby members of Congress, and recruit students to serve as contacts to the governmental divisions of the AVMA, AAVMC, and other organizations.

Create alternate educational models. Academic institutions are already evaluating the efficiency of current teaching models and seeking alternate revenue sources. But the AAVMC's Dr. Pappaioanou notes the need to consider newer educational models, such as virtual or distance education, that might help keep tuition and fees down.

Cultivate core nontechnical skills. In 2001, Personnel Decisions International performed a study to identify the core nontechnical com-

petencies necessary for success in veterinary medicine and then suggested ways to develop these skills in veterinary graduates. The list of skills identified included interpersonal, leadership, communication, and business proficiency. Results from this project have been used to screen veterinary school applicants, design a nontechnical core curriculum, and for other activities. Future projects to capitalize on these efforts would include developing reliable, consistent measures to monitor progress in these nontechnical areas and review how effectively the training programs are working.

Inform students so they can make smart choices. Veterinary students and potential veterinary students must be given information up front to make intelligent decisions about their future. Paying more for a degree isn't a bad choice. But it does require an understanding of the ramifications. Students need to think about their life plans and how education costs fit into those plans. Is paying nonresident tuition a good idea? Would two years of community college while living at home be better than doing all undergradu-

ate work at a major university far from home? How will debt fit in with plans regarding marriage, family, and so on? What will happen if those plans don't work out as anticipated—what if a student eventually becomes a single parent? Obviously no one can identify and plan for every possibility, but students do need to think about the consequences of educational debt beyond their starting salary. It's often the last year in veterinary school before the reality of debt and earning a living sets in. Students still have many options to increase their earnings at that point, but it's too late to make choices that would reduce their debt load.

Dr. Wendy Labrousse knows that all too well. While she participated in an accelerated program and didn't live extravagantly, she recognizes now that she could have done things differently to minimize her debt—things

she's learned to do since graduation.

After months of financial frustration during that first year out, she and her husband decided to drastically change their lifestyle. They cut all unnecessary expenses, drove old cars, shopped at thrift stores—anything they could do to scale back. They also committed to pay off credit card debt, save a little every month, and pay more than the minimum on their loans, even if it was just \$5 extra. Eventually the couple saved enough to buy a house, and when an opportunity arose for Dr. Labrousse to become part-owner of the practice where she worked, she took it. She became full owner earlier this year and is feeling financially secure.

Still, she's concerned about the veterinary profession. "I've done OK because there's a second income in my family," she says. "But it's tough for single wage earners. As business owners, we need to charge appropri-

ately so we can pay appropriately, but students also need to live as simply as possible and not expect a luxurious salary right away."

Student debt and the economic viability of the profession are complicated problems, but fortunately, many of the early steps toward change have already occurred. And while thoughtful analysis of the issues is critical, we must be careful not to get so discouraged that we end up fulfilling our own gloomy prophecies. If all stakeholders commit to positive change—including private practice veterinarians—we will surmount the challenges presented by student debt. ■



Dr. Karen Felsted is CEO of the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues. Send questions or comments to ve@advanstar.com.



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