

## **Veterinary Leadership – induction for new students**

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### **Professional studies as an emerging key component of veterinary curricula**

A key change that has taken place in the recent development of veterinary education is the recognition that curricula not only need to provide the knowledge and technical skills required of a veterinarian, but also the ethical, moral and behavioural norms that are expected of veterinary professionals (1, 2). Hence, whilst there is still debate over the precise content of courses in so-called 'professional skills' (3), there is a universal trend towards the incorporation of such skills into the curriculum (4).

There has been a concurrent change in attitude about when students become part of the veterinary profession. Whilst this has traditionally been regarded to occur at the time of graduation or first registration, this is at variance with the legal status of veterinary students, who commonly have legal privileges that differentiate them from the 'general public'. Given the low attrition rates of veterinary students, selection into a veterinary programme can be considered *de facto* selection into the profession (5).

The point of entry of students into the profession, and the understanding of veterinary educators about this is more important than it may appear at face value, as there is a strong body of evidence that perspectives of teachers and students are markedly affected by it: Becker et al. (6) differentiated between the 'anticipatory socialisation' for the role of a medical professional where students are regarded as already being members of the profession, *versus* the dissociation of socialisation and content where entry to the profession is regarded as occurring after graduation. Thus, where students are regarded as members of the profession, it is relatively easy to start the process of their professional training in the arenas of behaviour, ethics and leadership from the first days of their studies.

### **Leadership and induction at the start of the degree**

Medical and veterinary educators have found that these threads can be drawn together in a form of veterinary leadership induction for new students. Medical schools have developed so-called 'white coat' ceremonies, at which students' entry to the medical profession is formalised and celebrated (7, 8), as a '*rite of passage, welcoming the new medical student into the medical profession, albeit as a student member*' (7: p.83). Such white coat ceremonies have been reported to aid students' development of a sense of belonging and identity as they leave behind their previous support networks as they transition to the medical training environment (9).

Veterinary educators have taken a rather different route. Personal characteristics other than academic ability are increasingly recognised as requirements for economic and career success in veterinary medicine (10) and, whilst leadership has long been regarded as a desirable trait, historically it has not been an explicit aspect of veterinary education. Furthermore, entrant students need to recognise that being a successful veterinary professional requires mastery of many non-technical competencies that transcend traditional academic skills. Although it is recognised that not every veterinary graduate will hold a formalised 'leadership position' within the veterinary profession, the important distinction is that students need to be personally responsible for their actions and that each member of a veterinary team has the capability to exert positive or negative influences upon clients and/or the public.

Recognising the need for training in this area, Kathy Ruby and Rick DeBowes of Washington State University introduced (2002) an evidence-based orientation and leadership programme for entrant veterinary students, to promote peer collaboration, and introduce principles of 'servant-leadership', teamwork, emotional intelligence, and effective communication (11). Awareness of the components of emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills) (12) gives veterinary students an understanding of the critical aspects that affect interactions with clients and co-workers. The University of California, Davis, was concurrently trialling a similar programme (13) and, subsequently, a national programme, called the Veterinary Leadership Experience (VLE), was developed. Since this inception, the VLE programme has grown to include partnership with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and has inspired various locally-tailored versions of leadership induction programmes at veterinary schools worldwide, including those at Murdoch University, Australia (14) and Massey University, New Zealand.

The leadership induction programme at Massey University, *Hill's VetStart@Massey*, not only celebrates students' entry to the profession as trainee members, but also catalyses development of their professional identity and sense of belonging to the veterinary community. A particularly valuable outcome of the leadership programme is facilitating the development of relationships between the students; the focussed period of time together enables them to move more quickly from being strangers who competed against each other for entry to the programme, to colleagues working with each other within the programme. Interestingly, the experience at Massey University also mirrors that of Burns et al. (11), who reported that students who did not attend the programme '*never bonded with their classmates and instructors and did not grasp the nuances of the curriculum as well as those who did attend; as a consequence, they struggled in the programme*' (p.302). Furthermore, it lays the foundations for the programme of professional studies (i.e. the curriculum in the affective domain) that will take place throughout the remainder of the degree, and helps students transition from dependent to experiential learning (15), understand the validity of their own and others' moral reasoning, and understand society's expectations of them as members of the veterinary profession.

### **Alignment of the pre-entry leadership programme with themes of leadership and professionalism in the degree**

The benefits that are conferred by such induction/leadership courses have to be built upon in the subsequent curriculum or risk being transient and/or marginalised. Independent learning and professionalism are relatively easy to promote amongst the highly-motivated students that enter a veterinary programme, but are equally easily stifled in a teaching environment that is inimical to such qualities. Thus, the experiential group and problem-based learning activities which are undertaken in small groups in the leadership induction programme need to progress to activities in the curriculum itself that emphasise problem-solving, team-building activities, decision-making and taking responsibility (16). Likewise, the reflective processes that are initiated in the leadership induction programme also need to be built into the curriculum, so that as different components of students' emotional intelligence and personality become apparent they can be explored to further their professional development.

Finally, it is important to recognise that all of these processes need to take place within an appropriate learning environment. It should address not only student educational and workload issues, but also provide a safe environment for personal interactions between students and staff as well as between individual students. The philosophy behind self-management needs to be brought out of the classroom or induction programme and be applied in a meaningful way, by faculty and students alike, throughout the curriculum.

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