

## How do we leave the profession better than we found it?

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AAEP demographics data in 2020 shows that 26.6% of membership is composed of doctors over the age of 60.<sup>1</sup> As these doctors consider retiring, they are affected by the fact that 50% of new doctors entering the profession leave within five years.<sup>2</sup>

It is essential that we continue directing resources toward retaining current

practitioners and attracting new doctors to the profession. However, we also need to be there as an organization and as individual colleagues for the generation of doctors that has served the horse and the profession, and that sees no straightforward path to retirement. This includes the significant group of doctors who resist closing their doors to continue providing care for patients that otherwise would be abandoned. There is an increasingly frequent scenario in rural areas where, given the paucity of veterinarians, there are no new doctors waiting to receive the torch of an ambulatory practice.

In a 2020 article, Dr. Amy Grice writes that “finding a new paradigm will be necessary to retain veterinarians in equine practice.”<sup>3</sup> Yes. And as we struggle to find that new paradigm, we as a profession have an obligation to the generation that is attempting to retire: to be of service to those who have served. Make no mistake, the youngest generation is watching. How can they justify entering the vortex of a profession without an obvious exit at the end of years well worked? We need to put resources in for doctors who are trying to get out, just as we pool resources now to pull new doctors in.

The seminars and networking opportunities for doctors entering the profession have been invaluable for attendees. A parallel set of seminars for the generation preparing to leave the profession that acknowledges their predicament, describes the context from which their dilemma arises, and reviews practice valuation and retirement strategies for ambulatory practitioners could make a difference. At the least, they would know that their struggles are normal and not a reflection on them. At best, they could come away with new approaches that assist them with their goals and help some form of their practice survive the transition.

New practitioners often feel unmentored, which deters some from pursuing practice ownership. Experienced

doctors often find it difficult to ease out of practice because there is no one there to step up as they step away. Networking and workshops to connect these two groups could help them help each other and, in turn, help the profession.

If we do not rise to the challenge for change from the inside out, our profession risks being further stifled from external forces such as corporate consolidation and increased insurance regulation that make it more difficult for younger doctors to become practice owners. This is important because one of the reasons that new veterinarians cite for leaving equine practice is low salary,<sup>4</sup> and practice ownership is one of the most reliable ways for veterinarians to increase their earnings.

When we reflect upon how we approach our practice of medicine and how we interact with the culture of our profession, we can contribute to creating the shifts that will enable working in equine medicine to be a sustainable endeavour for those of us in its midst, a profession from which it is possible to retire, and a viable career option for a wider range of people.

If our profession is one that people find difficult to enter, difficult to remain in, and difficult to leave, then it is stagnant. Our profession is parched for diversity on all levels, and I would submit that its lack of diversity has contributed to its stagnation. Its rescue will depend upon each of us being willing to challenge our assumptions; align with, rather than compete against, colleagues; and offer our compassion and creativity in addition to the deductive reasoning in which we are trained when we communicate with each other.

What can I contribute to this profession in hopes of leaving it better than it was when I found it? Opportunities for engagement abound! They include, but are not limited to, workshops and seminars such as Dr. Amy Grice’s *Decade One* program and Dr. Betsy Charles’ work through the Veterinary Leadership Institute and the AAEP Lead program. Dr. Stacey Cordivano hosts a podcast and resources through *The Whole Veterinarian*. She, along with Drs. Cara Wright, Kelly Zeytoonian, and Misty Gray, have created *Sustainability in Equine Practice* seminars and retreats. Drs. Caitlin Daly and Kelly Zeytoonian offer new approaches to solo and group practices with presentations that can be found in the 2021 AAEP Convention *Proceedings*.

You do not need to own a practice to join the Independent Veterinary Practitioner’s Association, an  
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## How do we leave, continued

organization in need of representation from more equine veterinarians as it works to keep practice ownership an option for interested doctors. Mentor another doctor. Mentoring is a simple act that can change a career trajectory. Volunteer for the AAEP!

The answers to the questions of what keeps us here and what can we contribute before we leave will differ for each of us. In the area where I practice, we are developing contacts between a group of solo equine practitioners, all of whom are mothers. These quiet connections are seismic because they alter the tone of communication between veterinarians and create an inclusive culture shift of doctors working to redefine their relationship to medicine in order to continue practicing it. When we do this, we help the profession.

We all have our stories, our struggles, and our successes. We all have something to give. It is up to us to ask ourselves how we can make the profession more accessible to enter and gentler to leave. We can leave the profession better than we found it.

### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Grice, A. "Why Veterinarians Are Leaving Equine Practice". In Proceedings: American Association of Equine Practitioners 2020. Vol 66 pp. p.170.
- <sup>2</sup> Grice, A. "Why Veterinarians Are Leaving Equine Practice". In Proceedings: American Association of Equine Practitioners 2020. Vol 66 pp. p.170.
- <sup>3</sup> Grice, A. "Why Veterinarians Are Leaving Equine Practice". In Proceedings: American Association of Equine Practitioners 2020. Vol 66 pp. p.177.
- <sup>4</sup> Grice, A. "Why Veterinarians Are Leaving Equine Practice". In Proceedings: American Association of Equine Practitioners 2020. Vol 66 pp. p.176.