

The ethics of hard work

By Jackie Christakos, DVM



Dr. Jackie Christakos

Lazy.
Entitled.
Not committed.

How many times do these terms come up in generational discussions pertaining to more junior members of equine practice? As a member of the millennial generation (generally defined as those born from 1981–1996), I've heard this old yarn time and

time again; however, I respectfully beg to differ as a practice shareholder, full-time equine veterinarian and parent of a toddler. A strong work ethic is part of my DNA. Oddly, as much as I disagree with this assessment of my generation, I find myself having the same suspicions of Generation Z (born from 1997–2012).

Why should a first-year associate have a better schedule than I expected at their career stage? And isn't it unfair that they are offered better compensation with more time off than I was as a newbie in practice? When I was an intern, I functioned on minimal sleep and made pennies. Why should it be any different now? If I walked three miles barefoot backward in the snow, shouldn't they?

After I dust off my inner grumpiness, I look at the overall condition of our profession. Burnout and compassion fatigue abound. Equine veterinarians are leaving at an alarming rate, citing better pay and more family-friendly environments elsewhere. Less competitive cultures and improved life balance expectations in other segments of veterinary medicine or in another career in general are also motivating factors. Recent industry surveys indicate only 1 to 1.5 percent of graduating students are entering equine practice. AAEP data suggests a startling rate of attrition from equine practice in the first five years post-graduation. From a health perspective, sleep deprivation and extreme stress are known risk factors for long-term wellbeing consequences and increased incidence of medical mistakes.

Are the young associates and new graduates really bringing up outlandish ideas? Or are they simply questioning the unhealthy and unsustainable path many of us have accepted as the "way it is done"? Perhaps we would be wise to listen with an open mind and consider if equine practice can evolve regardless of our generation. The real question may be if our long-established asks and expectations remain ethical.

All this being said, expertise is earned through experience, and this should not be lost in the conversation. The 10,000-hour rule popularized by author Malcom Gladwell says that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice is typical to develop expertise. The value of opportunity in practice to improve our technical skills and problem-solving abilities over time cannot be underestimated, especially with appropriate mentorship applied for greater efficiency of learning. Luckily, we still find ambitious veterinary students who have chosen to ignore years of warnings on the negatives of equine practice and have forged on, pursuing their passion despite the hard work that lies ahead. Lazy and non-committed individuals would be unlikely to have made it past these initial roadblocks in the first place.

Identification of problems is easy, but what about practical solutions? Some opportunities may exist as low-hanging fruit. Dr. Amy Grice, an AAEP member with strong business acumen, advocates for equitable pay for hours worked considering experience gained—internship and residency programs included. The goal is to make the education attained financially viable for new graduates with a crushing debt load. Fee increases are likely to be required to support improved compensation and will be bolstered by decreased supply of equine veterinarians in the face of projected stable demand.

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Consider development of a minimum sleep strategy or flexible team leverage to allow appropriate rest for all staff. Positions that frequently require several days with limited sleep may warrant creative scheduling. Solo or small practice approaches may include cooperative models for emergency coverage. While challenging to manage, appropriate rest is critical to the long-term health of veterinarians and limiting mistakes due to sleep deprivation.

Time off may hold more or equal value than traditional monetary compensation among a younger group of veterinarians. Watching parents struggle during an economic downturn and living through a pandemic has changed the perspective for many. More recent generations may choose

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