



Specialty Veterinary Medicine Stakeholder Summit

Collective Action to Address the Small Animal Veterinary Specialist Shortage

March 8, 2023 | Washington, DC

Action Summary

In recognition of our commitment to address critical issues in the veterinary profession, the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM) joined other veterinary specialty colleges, veterinary associations, corporate practice groups, independent practitioners and industry representatives at an invitational meeting about the critical shortage of veterinary specialists. This meeting is envisioned as the first of a series of specialty veterinary medical summits to identify and address collaborative opportunities to lead change in the profession. At this inaugural event, participants defined the following priority areas and activities for collective action:

- 1) Strengthen financial resources to expand academic training programs.
 - a) Create a framework for sponsored specialty residency programs that leverage the best of available models, data and practices.
 - b) Advocate for federal funding for veterinary medical specialty training.
 - c) Develop methods to share human and financial resources across the system.
- 2) Build the pool of potential future specialists.
 - a) Ensure vet students and interns have exposure to all specialties.
 - b) Define the competencies needed for aspiring applicants to enter a residency program.
 - c) Create a campaign to recruit the next generation of specialists.
- 3) Modernize training to enable growth of programs while ensuring quality.
 - a) Frame residency training requirements in the context of specialty competencies.
 - b) Innovate training programs to be more flexible and inclusive.
 - c) Develop didactic resources to be shared across specialty medicine.

To meet the urgent need for clinicians, educators, and researchers, representatives from specialty colleges will begin the process of redefining residency training requirements to be more flexible and inclusive. Additionally, the group agreed to reconvene within the next year to begin to define core competencies that transcend all specialties, which will drive further evolution of individual college training requirements.

This Summit highlighted the importance of working collaboratively to address the needs of veterinary specialty medicine. As ACVIM President Jörg Steiner noted, “Our ability to have the desired impact on specialty medicine will be greatly optimized by collective action.” To that end, the specialty college representatives will continue working together across the profession to address their shared mission to serve the animal health community.

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Coming together to shape the future of veterinary specialty medicine

At the beginning of 2022, a group of leaders representing several veterinary specialty colleges began a series of conversations designed to identify and explore issues that transcended any one specialty. The shared premise was the acknowledgment that veterinary medicine is undergoing fundamental transformational change, and the collective wisdom and influence of specialty college leaders would help ensure the long-term sustainability of the role specialty medicine plays in the care of animals and in the contribution to overall societal wellbeing. The group identified the disparity between the supply of specialists, particularly small animal specialists, and the growing demand for specialty care as the issue that poses the biggest risk to the collective missions of the colleges.

Stakeholder Summit

On March 8, 2023, a broad group of stakeholders, comprised of leaders from privately held and corporate-owned practices, academia, industry, and specialty colleges were invited to define a range of actionable solutions to build the pathways of specialists. In doing so, the group aimed to mitigate the following risks to the profession and to the ability to advance animal health:

- **Quality, access to care, research, provider wellbeing and patient outcomes will be compromised if the supply of specialists is not better able to meet the demand for services.**
- **The mission of specialty veterinary medicine will be unfulfilled if the supply pressure isn't alleviated, or if the model for educating veterinary students and training specialists isn't critically evaluated as core factors in alleviating the shortage.**
- **Allied professionals, regulatory bodies, or others may step in to fill the vacuum created by a lack of specialists.**

The conveners of this conversation aimed to inspire an actionable, ongoing, and collective effort to address a critical risk to the profession. Through a series of structured conversations, virtual polling and expert facilitation, Summit participants defined a series of steps for organizational and collective action.

The Challenge

Specialists are critical to the future of veterinary medicine. Without the leadership, engagement and workforce of specialists, there will not be a population to train future

veterinarians, provide essential specialty care, lead research to expand the body of knowledge supporting veterinary medicine, influence human healthcare, and ultimately serve society.

Over the last several years, the shortage of veterinarians and technicians has been well documented (Lloyd, 2021). This shortage is even more acute in the small animal specialist population as demand for higher level care among a growing number of companion animal owners places additional pressure on an already stressed workforce. While this trend is also evident in some areas of large animal specialty medicine, the issues are somewhat different and require specific exploration to fully understand and address them in a collective way.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of a growing problem, there has not been a holistic, collaborative approach to addressing this concern. This is largely due to the complexity of the problem, and the lack of a singular body that exclusively represents the needs of specialty veterinary medicine. It is clear that systems thinking will be necessary in order to avoid unintended consequences that exacerbate the problem or shift the barriers elsewhere in the system. Further, it's important to understand that any measurable impact on the workforce will take years. The commitment to influencing this issue will require patience and collaboration among a variety of stakeholders, both within and outside of the population of specialty colleges.

In considering factors that influence the number of specialists, the complexity of the challenge cannot be overstated. Every facet of the system has co-dependencies and overlapping impact. Key issues such as the number and type of training programs, economic and individual financial factors, shortened tenure for specialists in the profession, changing demographics within specialty medicine, unique challenges within both academic institutions and private practices, and broader labor issues within veterinary medicine all impact the specialist shortage.

Factors Affecting the Shortage

Summit participants created the following list of systemic, program and individual factors that impede growth in the population of qualified veterinary specialists:

1. For the vast majority of specialties, there is an inadequate number of specialty residency positions relative to demand.
2. Existing residency training requirements limit ability to expand the number and size of programs.
3. Institutions do not have the financial resources required to expand academic training programs.
4. There is a lack of incentive and capacity across both clinical and academic settings to train residents.
5. The pre-residency journey lacks a direct, supportive path to specialization, and there is a need to increase awareness of veterinary specialty careers.
6. Clinicians do not typically engage in training or education on key elements of adult education and mentorship.
7. The method for selecting and training residents does not address the need for increased diversity and inclusion in specialty medicine.
8. The financial implications of pursuing board-certification are significant.
9. The culture of specialty medicine does not support the wellbeing of residents or specialists.
10. Declining retention of specialists in practice and academic settings exacerbates the workforce shortage.
11. Co-professionals (e.g., technicians, and primary care and emergency veterinarians) are not effectively utilized in delivering care or are unable to work at their highest level of expertise.
12. The current workforce reflects different generational expectations and perceptions of work-life balance.

Priorities for Action



Using the above framework, the participants ranked these factors on a scale of their impact on the problem, and the potential for addressing the barrier through collective action.

The group agreed that the items on this list are interdependent and are all important, and that some factors would be better addressed by individual organizations versus collective action through collaboration. They recognized the ability to have the desired impact would be largely influenced by focus and thoughtful sequencing of action. Based on that shared understanding, the group defined three priorities and activities for collective action.

Recommendations

- 1) **Strengthen financial resources to expand academic training programs.**
 - a. Create a framework for sponsored specialty residency programs that leverage the best of available models, data and practices.
 - b. Advocate for federal funding for veterinary medical specialty training.
 - c. Develop methods to share human and financial resources across the system.
- 2) **Build the pool of potential future specialists.**
 - a. Ensure vet students and interns have exposure to all specialties.
 - b. Define the competencies needed for aspiring applicants to enter a residency program.
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Commitment to Action

The group acknowledged that any measurable impact on the workforce will take years. However, there was also widespread agreement that the need is urgent, and there is the ability to take immediate action while also planning for long-term solutions. To that end, the specialty college representatives attending the Summit agreed to begin the following work immediately:

1. **Redefine residency training requirements to be more flexible and inclusive.**
2. **Plan a second Summit to define core competencies that transcend all specialties, which can serve as the basis for further evolution of individual college training requirements.**

By taking these steps in parallel, and sharing learnings along the way, the profession is acting with the requisite urgency, planning for thoughtful, sustainable change, and establishing a foundation for ongoing collaboration to serve the animal health community.

Small Animal Specialist Shortage Workshop Roster

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