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Leaders of the Pack: Women and the Future of Veterinary Medicine

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**LEADERS
OF THE PACK** **WOMEN
and the
FUTURE of
VETERINARY
MEDICINE**

JULIE KUMBLE and DONALD F. SMITH

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Introduction

From dog dentist to dean, the image of a veterinary leader is different for all of us. I might picture a laboratory pathologist deep into her research while you imagine a board-certified equine surgeon who also directs her multi-doctor practice like NASA ground control. Someone else envisions a public health officer tracking an avian influenza outbreak, while yet another thinks of a practice associate who is the consummate community member, volunteering as a 4-H leader, and working with the county health commissioner to develop criteria so that the local hospital administrator can legally allow pets in recovery rooms. The notion of a leader is tied less to title and position than to influence and impact.

While our idea of leaders is as varied as we are, one persistent image that seems grafted into our minds is that of the person who forges ahead with inspired followers in tow. For those raised on movies where leaders are solitary cowboys, tough military brass, or barking business tycoons, the image is decidedly individualistic, authoritative, and male.

Today, we know better because we've seen more. Leadership demands a wide range of skills, and while being solitary and tough can serve us well, so does being deliberative and collaborative. In veterinary medicine, the massive influx of women into the profession together with the unique qualities and aspirations of today's generation entering the field, call for a broader mindset and skillset.

The transformative entrance of women into the profession began in the 1970s, when legal and cultural changes ushered a wider acceptance of women as doctors. The seismic shifts came in the 1980s when women entering veterinary colleges reached 50 percent, and again in 2007 when the number of women in the entire professional workforce surpassed men.

While women now comprise about 55 percent of all veterinarians, leaders who hold top positions, from practice owners to industry CEOs to deans of veterinary colleges and directors in organized veterinary medicine, are comprised on average of only 25 percent women. This leadership

gap isn't unique to veterinary medicine; in fact, according to researchers on economics, politics, education, and culture, the leadership gap exists everywhere, even in prototypically female professions like nursing and nonprofit service. For most professions, women hold an average of just 20 percent of top positions. In Congress, it's still under 20 percent. It would seem, therefore, that veterinary medicine at 25 percent is doing quite well. It *is* thriving in many respects, but because the demographics of students and practicing veterinarians tilt so heavily toward women, the gender gap is acutely noticeable and problematic. Why, then, is the profession still imbalanced?

One reason that top positions are still held by men is that they once made up the majority in the profession and therefore naturally ascended to those leadership posts, positions that they still occupy. Women simply haven't caught up. But in many parts of the country, women have comprised over half of the graduating veterinarians for well over three decades and there's still a shortage of women at top levels.

The causes of the very real leadership gap between women and men are complex, multifactorial, and stubbornly embedded in our mentalities, cultural norms, and social policies. Most of us want a society at large and a profession in particular that reflect our demographics, but because of the stew of cultural, systemic, psychological, and economic factors, we just can't seem to accelerate progress. Or can we?

There isn't one single cause of the gender gap, nor one gleaming solution. If that was the case, we'd be a lot closer to closing it and we wouldn't be writing this book. Through over two hundred interviews and related research, what's clear is that an abundance of men and women care deeply about shifting the leadership of the profession to reflect the growing numbers of women, and they're working hard to bring about change. People as diverse as the self-proclaimed "old white men" of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), leaders of the Student AVMA (SAVMA), and deans at veterinary colleges are all focused on women's leadership. In the following pages, we tease apart the challenges and offer solutions to help bring greater balance to the leadership in veterinary medicine. Our goal isn't just to promote women's leadership for its own sake, but to ensure that the multibillion-dollar veterinary industry is led mostly by veterinarians.

The plethora of books, workshops, conferences, and institutes dedicated to leadership all point to people's understandable desire to fulfill their potential and realize their ambitions. The problem is that most of the leadership proponents suggest that the same framework and skills can be applied in settings as diverse as nonprofits, nursing, sports, or medicine. Most leadership approaches take a general view, often drawn from the business milieu, and apply it to complex, specific situations.

We firmly believe that some of the most effective solutions come from cross-professional approaches, and we promote learning and collaborating from within and outside veterinary medicine. As coauthors from different backgrounds, we embody this very principle, and we debate, agree, and differ, all in the spirit of learning. However, for this book we have drawn most of our examples and recommendations from the veterinary profession. We've examined the leadership research in veterinary medicine, limited as it is, and have conducted hours of interviews with veterinarians—mostly women but also many men—in order to offer veterinary-specific leadership strategies.

Another limitation in most of the leadership literature and development methods, in our opinion, is that they focus on helping individuals achieve success much more than promoting solutions that would benefit greater numbers of people. Some leadership research and practice suggest that women might have interests beyond their salaries or benefits, such as better family leave policies, flexible schedules, or more time for community service, but those approaches rarely emphasize collective action as a goal other than in passing. Their enthusiastic focus on individual advancement diverts instruction on how people could, and should, work toward organizational and societal reform. In a world where pathogens travel across borders as quickly as jets can carry them, where zoonotic problems call for One Health solutions, and where human health can be vastly improved by creative applications of the human-animal bond, we need leaders whose views and skills target broad solutions that benefit society. Fortunately, some of the most socially focused leadership training is found in organized veterinary medicine at all levels—local associations, state groups, and the AVMA—and many, many members are leading the charge to improve society.

We deeply value leadership for the greater good, naming our final chapter for this principle. We also value leadership for people's sense of personal satisfaction and wellness. We explore the intricate balance of leadership, success, and happiness in one of our chapters, and firmly believe that leadership aspirations shouldn't become another pressure point for veterinarians at the expense of happiness and well-being. The disturbing fact is that veterinary medicine has a suicide rate higher than all other professions, and we are emphatic that aspiring to leadership should enhance people's joy, satisfaction, and connection to others.

Do we need to ask if veterinarians gravitate toward leadership literature and programs that promote individual success over collective change? Are veterinarians more oriented to animals than people and therefore are less likely to engage in policy activities that involve debate, compromise, and committees? Some research suggests that women in general don't identify as a particularly oppressed class of people;¹ therefore, are female veterinarians even less likely to see themselves as a group that should organize to pursue shared goals? None of these suggestions is backed by research, but the questions are worth exploring because they offer insight into how we have gotten here and how we will move forward.

We do know that generational differences play a role in how women do or do not get involved in social change. For the most part, the early trailblazers were outliers with different qualities than the broad swath of women who today make up the majority of the profession and veterinary colleges. Some female veterinarians who succeeded in the early days and became leaders were reluctant to take on "women's issues" because they didn't want to be branded as difficult or as "angry feminists," fearing they might jeopardize their own paths. Or because they made it in a man's world, they believe that young women who are coming up today have it much easier and do not need special championing. Younger veterinarians haven't experienced the obstacles, subtle and blatant, of their predecessors, and they are less likely to take up the mantle of leadership, at first. Or they themselves do not want the attention of being labeled a feminist.

Fourth-year Cornell veterinary student Michelle Forella says of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI), "I had heard about WVLDI before, but didn't think much about it much because

it had ‘the W word’ and I was still afraid of that stigma. When we had the women’s leadership course in March 2014, it was eye-opening to learn that women in veterinary medicine still face obstacles. Still, if it wasn’t for the camaraderie I felt when discussing these challenges openly with my classmates, I wouldn’t have felt as empowered to champion women’s leadership going forward.”

Through camaraderie or a sense of passing along opportunities, many women who are in leadership, older and younger, have used their prospects and sense of obligation to promote changes that make leadership more accessible to others. In the pages of this book, we ardently support women and men in veterinary medicine who are working together for improved policies that help women succeed and achieve leadership, and we feature their stories and strategies for improving the profession.

Well over 80 percent of clients who take their companion animals to a veterinary clinic are women themselves,² and they are fascinated by the stories of the female doctors managing their pets’ health. As animal lovers, many once considered becoming veterinarians. Ask people about their vet and they’re likely to speak glowingly. In writing this book, when we shared our project with friends and strangers, nearly everyone enthusiastically said the same thing: “You should interview my vet! She’s so smart and caring.”

The individuals profiled in these pages reflect multiple sectors of the profession. Some will be recognized as high-profile leaders, while others are influencing veterinary medicine in ways that haven’t garnered press releases but are nevertheless bold and authentic. There are far too many outstanding people in the profession to ever fit between the covers of one book, and we chose to highlight individuals who demonstrate qualities and life paths rather than hold them up as “best” examples. As diverse as the people and their stories are, the common characteristic is their commitment to advancing our profession.

Change at top levels will eventually come about as more and more women enter the profession, many say, but because leadership posts are still predominantly male after so many years of women outnumbering men, we can’t just be patient and wait. Simply speaking, it’s unfair to the current generation to be patient and wait for seats to open at the top. We

risk losing out on their full range of talents by asking them to wait or to deal with the array of hurdles that we can minimize.

Among the changes that can't wait for gradual implementation are:

- Changing organizational policies to better accommodate women's different career paths, their multiple work and life goals, and the reality that they bear children and, still, do the majority of household work in couples;
- Closing the salary gap between men and women by researching the various causes and by developing targeted strategies;
- Reducing women's psychological barriers to self-advancement through effective and accessible training; and
- Integrating leadership and professional development into veterinary education with the same rigor as clinical training.

If these and possibly other changes were brought to the front burners *now*, wouldn't we encourage a wider swath of talent to move to leadership positions? Imagine how veterinary medicine would shine as a bold exemplar among other professions if its leadership profile more closely reflected the demographics of its own profession. More importantly, with more women in key leadership positions, the very nature of the profession itself—whether the commitment to One Health, serving rural areas at the interface of human and animal health, or a dozen other priorities—might increase its value to society and open up new opportunities for workforce expansion.

What can we anticipate as essential leadership qualities for the future? Forecasted changes in veterinary medicine include growth across the profession, whether through increasing the proportion of owners seeking care for their pets, by harnessing the genome to personalize animal medicine, leveraging the human-animal bond to enhance human health and welfare, adopting the principles of One Health for public health and comparative medicine, corporatization of practices and management, and online teaching and learning for veterinarians and veterinary technologists. Good or bad, the point about these changes is that they're here or just around the corner.

Looking ahead, we might not know everything that will face veterinary medicine, but we know we will need leaders with the sharpest skills honed from the past, an understanding of the profession's history, and the most up-to-date approaches from today to help guide the way.³ We do not know precisely what the future of the profession will look like, but we know that brilliant and committed students and new veterinarians are ready to take the helm. We should teach what we know, encourage and support them, then stand back and let them lead.

Notes

1. Barbara Kellerman and Deborah L. Rhode, *Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change* (San Francisco: Wiley and Sons, 2007).
2. John Payne (former CEO Banfield Pet Hospital), personal communication with authors, March 7, 2016.
3. James W. Lloyd, Lonnie J. King, Carol A. Mase, and Donna Harris, "Future Needs and Recommendations for Leadership in Veterinary Medicine," *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 226, no. 7 (2005): 1060–67, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2460/javma.2005.226.1060>; Karen M. Bradley, Elizabeth M. Charles, and Joan C. Hendricks, "A Renewed Call for Veterinary Leaders," *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 247, no. 6 (2015): 592–94, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2460/javma.247.6.592>.