

How to make the veterinary profession a sustainable career

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Veterinary Team Training

For me, being a veterinary technician is a passion. I knew from an early age I was going to work with animals. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do, so my first major in college was wildlife management. Within the first year I knew that wasn't the right path. My second year of college I majored in veterinary technology, and I was hooked.

This profession has never been an easy one. I've always had to work two jobs to be able to afford to live. I've never bought a car I've actually wanted. I've always bought the cheapest one. I've known burnout so many times I've lost count. I've cried over patients and pet owners. I've had friends tell me to stop talking about my job because it made them sad. I've had family members judge me for not becoming a veterinarian. I've taken home three stray pets from my jobs over the years. I will never be a hand model. Bending down and getting back up is getting harder as I age. Many times, I feel undervalued and underappreciated, but you know what? I still love my career. That said, it's a very broken profession.

We need real careers

Very few of us have title protection and equally important, a regulated scope of practice. Title protection means we have a real profession. I stated that those who are just as skilled and knowledgeable, but do not have credentials, should not use the term veterinary technician to help support the whole profession.

The reality is when anyone can call themselves a veterinary technician it means anyone can do the job. There is no point to education if a high school graduate can do the same job and have the same title. Until we, (meaning everyone from hospital owners, veterinarians, pet owners, veterinary community and the individual people like you and I) only use the title to mean credentialed veterinary technicians, it will continue to mean nothing. We devalue ourselves because we give away the title freely. This drives all our salaries down because there is no value to the profession. All of our salaries are driven down including those who are not credentialed. If anyone can do our job, it means there is little to no value, so we all get paid less as a result. This profession started by paying a low-wage to people who were on the job trained and it continues to be that way despite the job requirements increasing 10-fold. We will all continue to make a low salary until we place a value on education and, therefore, protect the title. Until that happens, anyone can do our job which means we all make low salaries.

Protecting our scope of practice is also important. The scope of practice is completely lacking or barely there in most states. In some states, the title is protected, but there is no scope of practice meaning still anyone can do the job. In states that have protected scope of practice it's limited.

For example, in one state only a credentialed veterinary technician can place intravenous catheters, give a rabies vaccine and induce anaesthesia, but the law makes no mention of who can monitor anaesthesia. What's the point of protecting the title if anyone can still pretty much do the same procedures? There must be a large, protected scope of practice if we want the profession to have value. NAVTA recently released a survey that concluded most individuals would like title protection and scope of practice, but both are poorly understood.

For those who are non-credentialed this benefits you as well. Until we separate out the two, we don't have a defined profession as a whole. Once we have a real veterinary technology profession which title and scope of practice protection, then veterinary assistants get a career of their own. We can then define what a veterinary assistant profession looks like and place a value on it. Veterinary assistants would have the opportunity to grow and earn a higher salary, just like registered nurse assistants. They too would finally have a true profession that is worth something.

Professions are created and salaries are increased because they are separated out by titles, education, and job responsibilities. Right now, we are all living in a devalued profession because we are all lumped into one category simply because people believe it does not matter. It's a profession that anyone can be taught to do "on the job" and therefore it's compensated for the low-low price of us not being able to afford to live.

How do we solve these two issues?

It's on all of us at every level to work to solve this problem. If you work in this profession and have the time, get involved in your state organisation to fight for title protection and scope of practice. I'm tired of hearing "well my vet tech association needs to fix it." Who do you think belongs to the vet tech association? People like you and me! We are those people fighting for change, not anyone else.

If you don't have the bandwidth, then educate those around you. Educate your friends, family, and neighbours. I just recently had a conversation with a friend whose cat needed a dental cleaning. I said, "you should ask who will be monitoring the anaesthesia and who will be doing the procedures like cleaning and teeth extractions." They replied, "what do you mean?"

I explained the varying level of education and skill in veterinary hospitals. Armed with this information they are now in search of a veterinarian that will have a credentialed veterinary technician monitor the anaesthesia and are ensuring only a veterinarian performs the extractions. The pet owner who demands these things is looking for a certain level of care, which means there is a value for education.

We should request, if not demand, our employer pays credentialed veterinary technicians more money and places a value on education. They should differentiate out credentialed versus non-credentialed by title. Yes, we all have a part of play in this battle of title protection and scope of practice.

We need more money and better benefits

We keep screaming about this and it's absolutely critical this gets fixed, but I would argue that until veterinarians, managers and owners place a value on credentialed veterinary technicians and nurses this will continue to be a struggle. Unfortunately, if a veterinary practice can get by paying a lower cost of labour they will continue to do so.

That said, in the meantime, we all need to be paid more. While there's a lot of talk from hospital leaders about how great veterinary technicians are priceless, it turns out it's all talk. There is a price tag and it's too low.

As previously mentioned, the field of veterinary technology started by asking your family friend or the neighbour's kid to help restrain pets. These individuals were paid under the table and very little. In the 1970s the first United States Veterinary Technology program was created in New

York. By the 1990s there were a little over 50 AVMA accredited schools, but most were on-the-job trained.

Fast forward to 2022 and the face of the veterinary technology profession has drastically changed. Veterinary technicians are asked to do more now than ever. Veterinary technicians now perform epidurals, develop anaesthesia plans, monitor anaesthesia for heart-valve replacement surgeries, administer dialysis, run CPR codes, place arterials lines and much, much more. And yet, the salaries are largely still that of the on-the-job trained salaries.

My original 1990s starting vet tech salary of \$6.50/hour would equal \$12-14/hour today depending on the inflation calculator used. The salary of \$12-14/hour is what many credentialed veterinary technicians are start off making in this profession despite the fact the job has drastically changed. In short, veterinary medicine is still paying the original 1990s salary they paid for on-the-job trained individuals who were doing little-to-nothing in the hospital. Veterinary medicine needs to pay a salary worthy of a veterinary technicians, an actual profession which has driven the revenue up in veterinary medicine very high thanks to the expert skill and knowledge they bring to the hospital.

A 2010 study published in JAVMA stated the following, “Results of regression analysis suggested that the typical veterinarian's gross income increased by \$93,311 for each additional credentialed veterinary technician per veterinarian in the practice.” There was no increase for on the job trained veterinary assistants. So where is our piece of the pie if we’re helping to make money for the hospital?

Besides salary, benefits also need to change with the times. Right now, the veterinary industry is 80-90% women. This means there’s a lot of babies. Why do we have bare bones maternity/paternity leave in 2022? Why are there not daycare benefits? We need benefits that help support the employees that work for us. The industry needs to start thinking about the needs of those that work for them from college education benefits to school loan payments, wellbeing, and mental health benefits. The standard cookie-cutter benefits and salary from the 1980s aren’t cutting it in the industry anymore.

How do we solve this issue?

The solution to this is to ask for and advocate for yourself and team. If you are in a position to influence salary and/or benefits do so. Research other markets. Get creative with your benefits. Consider shaking up salaries for veterinary technicians/nurses/assistants with a bonus structure or blowing them out of the water where your team doesn’t need a second job in order to live. Stop giving away your veterinary services for free or spending on items that the hospital doesn't really need. The focus of money must be back to the people that produce the revenue for the hospital.

Healthier workplace environment

Veterinary medicine is an industry full of toxicity and this blog is not capable of addressing all of the reasons why. Yes, it likely stems from some of the issues listed above, but it’s deeper than that. Included in the many reasons why there is so much toxicity:

- Lack how to work in a team (usually due to poor leadership)
- Lack of how to effectively lead and manage a veterinary team
- Lack of education on how to be an effective and profitable hospital
- Too high of cases resulting in burnout
- Disconnect between pet owners and veterinary profession
- Inability to set boundaries

- Unrealistic work schedules
- Illegal labour laws being practiced
- No career paths
- No continuing education
- No training of any kind
- Hospital leadership and/or individuals continued tolerance of bullying, discrimination, racism, bias
- Lack of diversity and inclusion

This isn't even the full list. All of these things and more lead to the toxicity that runs rampant in our profession. When you look at the list it's overwhelming. What can one person do to fix all of these things?

How do we solve this issue?

Everyone single one of us who works in this profession has a responsibility to fix these issues. We each can do our part. In your hospitals be kind to each other. Stop gossiping. Be inclusive. Care for each other with true empathy.

Create well-being and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) committees in your hospital. Get the team involved by making it fun and rewarding those who go above and beyond. Set boundaries for yourself first and then teach others how to take care of themselves better.

If you're in a leadership role, educate yourself. Set fair schedules for your team and make sure they are taking their breaks. Put systems into place to help protect their wellbeing.