



Veterinarian Job Profile

By Allyson Parks

The field of veterinary medicine is incredibly diverse and ever-changing, and veterinarians have the opportunity to pursue careers in teaching, government, and research, along with the most desired career path — private practice.



“Veterinary medicine is incredibly exciting. It is truly a pleasure to provide such a valued service to my clients, and I enjoy bonding with my patients. My veterinary career is like the gift that keeps giving. I don’t believe any

veterinarian is familiar with the term ‘boredom,’” said Dr. Andrew Lewis, an Orange County, CA, veterinarian and 2003 graduate of the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

According to the US Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook, veterinarians care for the health of livestock, pets, and animals, in addition to performing clinical research on human and animal health problems and defending humans against diseases carried by animals.

“A veterinarian may also work for the government performing a variety of job tasks with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Air Force Veterinary Corps, Food and Drug Administration, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [but] the most pursued opportunities are positions in private practice working with companion animals,” Lewis said.

More than 70 percent of veterinarians, Lewis among them, work in private practices treating small animals such as dogs, cats, reptiles, ferrets, birds, rabbits, and other pets. About a quarter of veterinarians work in mixed animal practices, where they treat wild animals, along with cattle, goats, sheep, and pigs.

Some veterinarians work at farms or ranches, providing such services as vaccinations, treatment for wounds and fractures, surgeries, and guidance regarding feeding, housing, and animal husbandry. They may also be involved with food safety and inspections, checking animals for such contagious diseases as E. coli and enforcing government regulations on food sanitation.

Lewis explained the everyday duties of veterinarians in private practice, where hours can be long, the work environment sometimes noisy, and doctors are often on call nights and weekends: “Every day, a veterinarian performs a variety

of duties which [vary] greatly from one pet to the next. The first duty to recognize is the veterinarian’s [obligation] to effectively and efficiently communicate with clients to understand their pet companion’s overall health.”

Lewis said that prior to any examination and before any treatment is provided, a detailed history about any past illnesses or injuries must be recorded. Every day, veterinarians perform several standard examinations, which include listening to the given animal’s heart and lungs, palpating the belly, checking the skin, evaluating the eyes and ears, and an oral examination.

Veterinarians are also trained to perform dental extractions, review x-rays, and evaluate blood and urine samples under the microscope. They also use tools and techniques common to human medicine, such as endoscopy, laser surgery, and ultrasound. “I particularly enjoy complex cases involving diagnostic tools like ultrasound, performing various surgical procedures, and providing relief to pets suffering from chronic problems like ear infections, allergies, and arthritis,” Lewis said.

Daily surgical procedures in private practice include spays, castrations, repairing lacerations, removing masses from anywhere outside or inside the body, and orthopedic procedures. The veterinarian must also develop a protocol and select the drugs to anesthetize a pet safely in order to perform a surgery.

“Preventative medicine is also an important daily job function for a veterinarian. I am regularly educating my clients about vaccines, dental hygiene, and weight control...Some veterinarians are also incorporating holistic medicine and alternative therapies to treat their patients, including acupuncture and providing natural supplements. It is important to recognize that a veterinarian is regularly challenged with unpredictable situations and must daily manage not only emergencies, but the clients waiting anxiously for quick decisions,” Lewis said.

Lewis also spoke about several interesting new developments in the field of veterinary medicine, including a new stem cell therapy for animals with arthritic joints and injuries to tendons



Science Job Feature

or ligaments. The stem cells are harvested from the animal's fat and injected into the place of injury. More information on this new therapy can be found at www.vet-stem.com.

The first prescription weight-loss medication for dogs, Slentrol Dirlotapide, has recently become available, and Lewis mentioned its benefits to older, arthritic animals that have a difficult time dealing with joint problems when they are overweight. He also described a new FDA-approved oral flea product, Comfortis, as "an easy and convenient option for owners wanting to avoid the difficulties of topical flea control." The medication is a chewable tablet that is given once a month and kills and prevents fleas for 30 days.

Admission to veterinary school is highly competitive, and there are only 28 accredited colleges of veterinary medicine in the nation. They usually require applicants to have taken courses in general biology, physics, biochemistry, inorganic and organic chemistry, animal nutrition, vertebrate embryology, genetics, zoology, cellular biology, systemic physiology, and microbiology. Applicants also must submit test scores from the Graduate Record Examination, the Medical College Admission Test, or the Veterinary College Admission Test.

Graduates with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree often enter a one-year internship, and those who seek board certification must complete a three- to four-year residency program that offers rigorous training in a specialty such as dentistry, surgery, neurology, exotic small-animal medicine, or internal medicine. To receive their licenses to practice, prospective veterinarians must pass the eight hour long North American Veterinary Licensing Exam, and many states also require a passing grade on a state jurisprudence examination. Veterinarians may also seek specialty training beyond completing their doctorate degrees, and usually work in facilities that offer diagnostic tools like CAT scans or MRIs.

Veterinarian employment is expected to rise 35 percent in the next decade, and excellent job opportunities are expected because of the small number of accredited

veterinary schools and limited number of graduates each year. More job opportunities are expected for large-animal veterinarians because there is less competition to work in rural areas.

"I would always advise anyone seeking a job in any position to try observing someone else in the field. Volunteering at a local veterinary hospital or shelter provides excellent hands-on experience, as well as clinical training necessary to apply to veterinary school. Although only a minimum of 180 hours of experience is necessary to apply, start early. The average admitted applicant has completed 3,000 to 3,500 hours of varied experience," Lewis said. Veterinarians often agree to have students shadow them, and some facilities offer externships for students to gain hands-on experience.

Lewis began his career in veterinary medicine working as a bathier when he was 16. Throughout college, he found many opportunities to work as a technician, performing diagnostic tests and treatments for the veterinarian. Receptionists in veterinary hospitals also gain invaluable experience interacting with clients, learning about various drugs, and taking patient histories. According to the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine website, 25 percent of the school's selection decision for a student is based on veterinary experience, and 50 to 60 percent of the decision is based on grades and the GRE.

"I would recommend choosing a bachelor's degree in the sciences. This will help to ensure you are completing your prerequisite courses and give you a stronger foundation for entering veterinary school. Many veterinary programs also look more favorably on students acquiring experience with a variety of animals. For example, hands-on training with exotic species and farm animals is a great bonus," Lewis said. He also recommended visiting the different veterinary college websites for more detailed information about application requirements and emphasized that "choosing a career in veterinary medicine has been incredibly rewarding."

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