EDITORIAL

Why aren’t more veterinary practices owned or led by women?

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The increasing proportion of women among the body of UK veterinary surgeons practising clinical medicine has been consistently highlighted in RCVS surveys (RCVS 2006, 2010, 2014a). Despite women outnumbering men in clinical practice (57 per cent versus 43 per cent) in 2014 (RCVS 2014a) they do not own veterinary practices, hold practice partnerships or leadership positions in proportions that are expected, even when adjusting for age and experience (RCVS 2014b).

Research has shown that professions with more women, or tracks within professions, tend to experience negative outcomes such as ‘male flight’, that is, a reluctance of young men to enter the profession, and suppressed pay (Reskin and Roos 1990), among others. This has been witnessed in other ‘feminised’ professions including law (Bolton and Muzzio 2008) and pharmacy (Gardiner and Stowe 2006). The ‘feminisation’ (defined as comprising of 70 per cent or more females [Menckin and Winfield 2000, Sappleton 2009]) of veterinary medicine is also apparent in other countries such as Canada (Lofstedt 2003), Australia (Heath and Lanyon 1996, Heath 2007), Turkey (Basagac Gul and others 2008) and the USA (Irvine and Vermilya 2010), with research highlighting that male flight and salary stagnation in comparison to other professions has occurred in North America (Smith 2002, Lofstedt 2003, Lincoln 2010). The increasing trend towards feminisation of the UK profession and the potential implications has attracted academic research interest (Henry and Treanor 2012, Treanor and others 2014, Treanor and Marlow 2016) but remains an under-explored area.

As Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) highlight in their paper summarised on p 408 of this issue of Veterinary Record, the under-representation of women in ownership and leadership roles has a detrimental effect at the individual level given that practice ownership is associated with higher earnings (Cron and others 2000). Moreover, practice ownership is also associated with greater clinical freedom than corporate employment (Treanor and others 2014), which may impact on job satisfaction and animal welfare (Lowe 2009).

Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) highlight the potential positive impacts for the profession in exploring and dealing positively with gender diversity. They contend that, as it remains unknown at what exact stage career aspirations towards practice ownership are formed, an important first step is establishing the existence of

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such aspirations among undergraduate students. Their study offers initial insights as to whether undergraduates are inclined or disinclined towards practice ownership, for what reasons, and whether there is a gender differential in such aspirations. Of interest, too, is Castro and Armitage-Chan’s evaluation of ownership aspirations across year of study. This is particularly important given previous findings that there was no differential in career aspirations among students when applying to veterinary school (Amass and others 2011) but that, during their first year of study, males became more likely than females to expect to become a practice owner (Bristol 2011).

Castro and Armitage-Chan undertook an online survey of students across all years of study at the Royal Veterinary College and the universities of Bristol, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Nottingham. The survey had three sections. First, it collected demographic data, details of employment history, university leadership roles and curriculum business content. Secondly, it garnered information pertaining to self-confidence, self-esteem and career aspirations. Finally, it asked questions about women at work, such as their awareness of female veterinary role models, child care facilities and flexible working hours.

The results highlighted that more male students (53 per cent) than female students (73 per cent) aspired to own a practice; men were also more likely to have held leadership roles in their Students’ Union or other clubs and societies. Men also had significantly higher (mean [sd]) scores than their female counterparts in relation to confidence (2.9 [1.3] v 2.5 [1.2], P<0.001), self-esteem (3.0 [1.4] v 2.7 [1.3], P<0.001) and leadership aspiration (5 [range 1-10] v 7 [range 5-16], P<0.001). Interestingly, aspiration to practice ownership declined across year of study, with final years being less inclined towards practice ownership than first years. There was an association between ownership aspiration and previous leadership experience, with a similar association for those who had undertaken paid work previously. Students exposed to business education as part of their curriculum were slightly less interested in practice ownership.

While the findings of Castro and Armitage-Chan’s study reveal a gender difference in practice ownership aspiration, it is slight in magnitude when compared to the actual gender difference in ownership and leadership roles within the profession. Arguably, a longitudinal study tracking this student cohort would be informative.

The small gender divide noted in this study may translate into a smaller gender divide in the profession at a later point in time when this cohort has amassed sufficient post qualification experience, associated with practice ownership. Should this smaller differential not materialise, such a longitudinal cohort analysis may provide insight into the personal and/or structural barriers encountered by these young men and women during their early careers that result in differential career outcomes.

Certainly, there is some evidence that, in the past, gendered notions of ‘fit work’, that is, areas of work considered more suited to women, were conveyed during veterinary education and practical work experience placements. This, in turn, influenced some women’s choice of veterinary practice area, for example, small animal practice (Treanor and others 2014). Some women do aspire to practice ownership and have the financial and technical capital to avail of practice partnership opportunities, but are not being afforded these opportunities due to gendered barriers, stereotypes and assumptions, or existing male owners preferring to sell to corporate chains rather than pursue succession as an exit strategy (Treanor and others 2014, Treanor and Marlow 2016). While Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) have begun to explore a rich and important seam of research, further work is required. Further research is also necessary to understand the factors influencing career progression and practice ownership during early careers that may exacerbate or ameliorate these outcomes.

Castro and Armitage-Chan’s findings should be of interest to veterinary educators and leaders. Awareness of female role models within the veterinary profession did not affect the likelihood of ownership aspiration for the young women surveyed. As the authors highlight, educators can have a positive impact on confidence and self-esteem in female students through challenging these students’ implicit gender stereotypes and self-concepts, which may serve to limit the potential opportunities they perceive as available to them in their future careers. To that end, Castro and Armitage-Chan suggest that assigning more young women to leadership roles in clubs, societies and Students’ Unions or designating them as group leaders, may positively impact on their self-perception and leadership aspirations. They also advocate a leadership teaching strategy that is more collaborative and relational as a means to offset the decline in leadership/ ownership ambition. This in turn may result in greater job satisfaction, more meritocratic career progression and remuneration for women.

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