

A CHANGING WORLD AND A CHANGING PROFESSION THE ROLE OF THE SPECIALIST VET

Shibu Simon,

Assistant Professor, College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences
Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University

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Through the course of this discussion, an attempt is made to explore a pressing question with significant repercussions for the profession and the professional. A coherent explanation of veterinary specialisation is vital to sustaining the profession's status and public perception.

The question to be answered is who or what is a veterinary specialist? Professor Philips Lowe has described veterinary specialisation as being 'confusing and opaque'. The answer to the question 'who is a veterinary specialist?' depends on the person to whom this question is directed. A decade ago a veterinary specialist could be Dr. A, who takes care of most of a large animal owners' farm management and treatment issues; to a small animal owner it was Dr. B, who was consulted for nearly all the issues that cropped up in small animal rearing.

However, over the last five to ten years, the perception of animal owners about who exactly is a veterinary practitioner has changed considerably. Animal owners have become more demanding now or to put it in other words, choosier. Animal owners now demand a doctor who 'does all the canine dermatology work' or one 'who takes care of his companion animal fertility issues' or one who 'takes care of all the pet bird work' or one who 'takes care of elephants'. This change in perception is not confined to animal owners, it has also found its place among veterinarians who now seek colleagues who are

referred to for 'orthopaedic cases' or 'cardiac issues in animals' or 'fertility problems' to mention a few.

Yes, we have to face the fact that specialisation is slowly and gradually making its presence felt in our mission of a 'lifelong obligation of the continual improvement of professional knowledge and competence'. To the animal owner, specialists are expected to provide advanced treatment and services with authoritative skill and expertise. As of now, the professions' concept of specialisation is rather insular and oriented towards fellow veterinarians rather than being aimed at informing the animal owners. Most animal owners are unaware of the differentiation between a specialist and a general practitioner in the veterinary profession.

Specialisation in the profession can happen in two ways: one by species and the other by clinical discipline. The first one based on species emphasises the informal, cooperative and experiential specialisation of practice whereas the second one based on discipline replicates the formal consultant model of human medicine.

With the growth of small animal practice, a more or less similar replication of the human medical model is slowly making its presence felt in this area. In human practice, even reputed medical associations endorse the fact that the main clinical techniques that general practitioners (GPs) use are talking and listening. In human medicine, the concept or

importance of GPs have disappeared from the society over the last two to three decades. This has been aggravated by the lack of interest among medical professionals to pursue a career as a GP and the increased tendency among the public to seek specialist services for almost all ailments. All these happenings have contributed in one way or the other in making the role of GPs in that sector almost nil. Lot of debates are going on about this issue even though no one has succeeded in bringing back the good old concept of the family doctor.

In contrast to this state of affairs, veterinary general practice has quite a different case to present. Veterinarians have traditionally being able to improvise in order to act out their varied roles that can be likened to being 'jack of all trades' or in more 'technical' jargon, 'polyspecialists'. Vets exercise great flexibility on their ability to turn their hand to many things. This kind of versatility is a unique feature of our profession's self identity. Thus, for the farm animal practice, GPs act as a clinical one-stop for most situations.

The Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or previously called Continuing Veterinary Education (CVE) programmes many at times are sufficient in itself in equipping veterinarians for a life times' practice. Indeed, most of the clinical CPDs provided by specialists consist of developing the GPs in ways that they perform challenging and complicated procedures and treatments.

Historically, in most parts of the world, the veterinary profession has viewed the idea of specialisation as a threat to the unity of the profession and the flexibility of professional careers. But, today the ubiquitous presence of specialists in the government department as well as other related organisations makes this idea less of a problem than it was a decade ago. At the undergraduate level the 'tracking' courses introduced by the Veterinary Council of India, essentially aims at developing specialist

skills even before graduation. However, there may be some who have contrary view points on this issue and believe that this risks compromising the flexibility and adaptability that are vital features of the profession.

At the end of the day, it would be a little bit too simple to state that the concept of specialisation is either a good or a bad thing. Specialisation has different demands for different sections of the profession. The work of poultry or a porcine specialist is much more concerned with the economic output of the herd or flock than the individual animal. The specialist should incorporate a wide variety of management, preventive and animal welfare issues as well as economic issues.

The last few years have witnessed the mushrooming of numerous private veterinary hospitals and service providers in the metros of the country. This trend is slowly making its presence felt in our state as well and naturally it opens up many new challenges to the profession as well. So also, throughout the country, there has been an increase in the number of veterinarians pursuing post-graduation. In Kerala, at present there are more than 230 postgraduates working with the state government, of which there are at least 25 in each of the clinical disciplines and the para-clinical subjects as well. A preliminary step in optimising the delivery of specialist veterinary health care in the government sector would be the creation of specialist posts in District Veterinary Centres. Even though we should avoid blindly accepting the medical model of specialisation or the narrow idea of serving market demands, a purpose driven model of specialisation will serve as a key contributor to improve the profession's esteem. However, one should also remember that the veterinary profession is in a state of transition, and it is therefore necessary to retain the versatile polyspecialist (the GP) at the dispensaries or hospitals in the gramapanchayats.

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