The 2011 Bartlett Address
The education of a theriogenologist
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“And Then There Was Serependity”. These words were the first slide in Dr. Ana Montes Adams’ seminar in preparation for defense of her Master of Science degree at Auburn University in 1994. I believe that statement describes how I came to be standing before you today.

I begin by extending my most heartfelt appreciation to the Society for Theriogenology and the American College of Theriogenologists for this honor you bestow on me. The invitation to present this lecture in honor of Dr. David E. Bartlett is a deeply humbling experience. With humility I graciously accept this award for all the mentors, students, residents and colleagues whose efforts have accomplished what this recognition was intended. I am especially fortunate to share the podium today with Dr. Bartlett, the gentleman who invented the term “Theriogenology” that brings us all together. I especially thank my family who believed in me and supported many long hours in my chosen profession, often neglectful of family activities.

I followed a very circuitous and perhaps non-traditional route to veterinary medicine. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee and my father worked for a railroad. In that job he was often transferred such that I attended 13 schools in five states by the time I graduated from high school. We never had a pet and I never lived on a farm although an uncle who farmed in Mississippi kept a horse for me and allowed me to spend much of my summers there. After graduation from high school I worked in a steel fabrication plant in Indiana then moved back to Memphis where I worked for a company that built railroad crossings and switches, then a sheet metal company that made roof flashings and water supply lines for sinks and toilets and later loaded and unloaded trucks for a freight line. I originally started college to become an architect then later changed to pre-veterinary medicine. I was a part-time student for many years and finished my B.S. degree in Animal Sciences at the University of Tennessee 10 years after graduation from high school. I was then fortunate to be accepted into the veterinary college at Auburn University where I graduated at 32 years of age as a “B” student.

So how does a vagabond city boy become a Food Animal Theriogenologist? Marie Dressler, Canadian actress, is quoted as saying “Never one thing and seldom one person can make for success. It takes a number of them merging into one perfect whole.” By no measure am I perfect but many people educated me along the journey. I saw my mare deliver a foal in the moonlight by sneaking out of my uncle’s house one spring night to see if the foal had been born yet. I developed an interest in reproductive physiology while at the University of Tennessee. During the veterinary curriculum at Auburn I was fortunate to be taught by theriogenologists Drs. Don Walker, Bob Hudson, and Ram Purohit, by equine surgeon Dr. John Vaugh (a), and by Dr. John Winkler, dairy veterinarian with excellent skills in bovine theriogenology. Each of these men, along with many others helped mold my interests in reproduction and clinical practice.

Just before I graduated from veterinary college in 1977 I served a 12 week preceptorship with Dr. Charlie Davis in Monte Vista, Colorado. Dr. Davis mentored me in how to become a veterinary practitioner in a ranch setting. Calving season in ranch country was a busy time and I left there with a zest for obstetrics and reproduction. After graduation I became an associate in a five veterinarian mixed practice in Jefferson City, TN. This was a typical mixed practice in that we covered too much territory and worked too many hours but I absolutely loved the work and the challenges. After three years I returned to Auburn for a graduate program and residency with the intent of returning to private practice. By this time theriogenologists Dr. Bob Carson, Dr. Gatz Riddell and Dr. David McClary were on staff. Drs. Hudson, Walker, Carson, Purohit and Dwayne Beckett guided my residency and graduate research. Upon completion of the residency
Dr. Walker offered me a faculty position in the Food Animal Section at Auburn and I have had an extremely rewarding career in that role.

You may recognize many of the names just listed. Dr. Bob Hudson, Dr. Don Walker and Dr. Bob Carson each received the Bartlett Award. Dr. Dwayne Beckett and Dr. Ram Purohit worked with Dr. Walker and others elucidating the mechanism of erection and penile corpus cavernosal pressures in the bull. Dr. Purohit is internationally acclaimed in thermography. Dr. J.T. Vaughan is a highly respected equine surgeon and co-authored the text Bovine and Equine Urogenital Surgery with Dr. Don Walker, for many years the premiere reference in its field.

Through the Society for Theriogenology and the American College of Theriogenologists I have developed friendships with colleagues in many parts of the country. We renew friendships at the annual conference and regularly communicate on cases, keep up with colleagues and on developments in our profession. A prime example of relationships that develop through these organizations is that on March 10, 2011, Dr. Larry Rice, now retired for several years, called to congratulate me on this award. I had the privilege to call Dr. Rice and notify him he was the recipient of this award for 2006. I first met Dr. Rice during the ACT practical exam in Nashville, TN, 1983. I nervously sat down across the table from him as he asked me to describe freezing bull semen. I am privileged to call him, like so many previous recipients of this award as friends and colleagues. They have shaped my career in innumerable ways.

So what does being a Theriogenologist mean to me today? It means I have been taught the skills that allow me to help animals and their owners in innumerable ways. Most of my day to day clinical activities are not what one would consider classical Theriogenology. Yes, I evaluate bulls for breeding soundness and examine females for suitability for breeding and for pregnancy. I take part in obstetrical management of females and with care of neonates. I perform restorative surgery on bulls and females that often allows them to continue their productive lives. I participate in research that focuses on basic and applied animal reproduction and diseases. Who among us doesn’t feel a sense of accomplishment when we palpate or ultrasound the pregnancy or deliver the calf or foal or lamb resulting from the embryo we collected from a donor that we managed then harvested, graded and transferred into a recipient that we managed to ovulate synchronously with the donor? Of course we all do. Or resuscitate the litter of puppies or calf that we deliver by cesarean section knowing that the neonate and possibly the dam would have died without our help. Of course we all do. Or perform reconstructive urogenital surgery on a sire or dam who later successfully breeds? Of course we all do.

We now use sexed semen, DNA testing for disease susceptibility and production traits, ultrasound, cryopreservation and vitrification of embryos, in-vitro fertilization and cloning as well as develop transgenic animals. We have numerous quick tests for pregnancy status, hormone levels and disease diagnostics. Today we have the best vaccines, antibiotics, hormone products and protocols in history but still the basics of animal husbandry and well-being are the foundation for fertility and reproduction.

Even with all the wonderful technological advancements, the foundation of our clinical skills still lies with our ability to instill sufficient confidence in the client to allow us to obtain a reliable history and to be observant and perform a thorough physical examination. Auburn is fortunate to have 15 theriogenologists on faculty. We are veterinarians first, then theriogenologists. Technology and science do not replace the personal touch.

I am blessed to have taught nearly 3000 veterinary students as well as assisted with the education of numerous residents in theriogenology, large animal medicine, and large animal surgery. For several years I have taught a class in Herd Health Maintenance in the Department of Animal Science at Auburn. A significant portion of that class is devoted to animal reproduction and obstetrics. A few of those students go on to become veterinarians but the majority fill jobs in animal agriculture or other animal health fields. I believe we have a strong obligation to educate people engaged in animal production and to the public on the role veterinarians fulfill in ensuring animal well-being and in ensuring a safe and abundant food supply.
Never lose sight of the fact that we have a personal relationship with the client. We are extremely fortunate to be able to better the lives of people and their animals. Perhaps Eli Lilly said it best in 1893, “Foolish indeed is the business organization that measures its success solely with a profit yardstick and ignores its most valuable assets: the faith and good will of those whom it seeks to serve, and the faith and loyalty of those who are dependent upon it for happiness.”

For production animals we can enhance the economic health of the farm and the owner through our services. How do we accomplish this? We are first and foremost veterinarians with a holistic approach to the herd, or flock as well as for the companion animal. We develop biosecurity plans and provide oversight for nutrition, housing, transportation and preventive health measures.

From the animal perspective we enhance their quality of life by applying our knowledge of breeding management, pregnancy diagnosis, obstetrics and post-partum care and to ensure that males are well-developed and satisfactory breeders and that females become pregnant in timely fashion to meet the production goals or the goals for the competitive athlete or family pet.

We determine pregnancy early in the fetal stage so that females are not unduly repeatedly exposed to breeding or maybe so that they do not carry a defective fetus to term. Early determination of pregnancy also enhances the accuracy with which we can predict time of parturition so that appropriate assistance can be available if needed.

The charter members of the Rocky Mountain Society for the Study of Breeding Soundness in Bulls, our parent organization, were focused on finding scientific solutions for issues of animal well-being and the welfare of their owners. The Society for Theriogenology still focuses on that goal. We are blessed to be members of a profession and organizations that are rich with mentors. Our members merge creativity and enthusiasm to form the synergy so vital for the future. The SFT and ACT are vibrant examples of the advice of Peter Drucker who is quoted as saying, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” We grow from our experiences and with the help of our colleagues. Many of us have chosen careers we would never have imagined and as I firmly believe the adage that “The key to a successful life is how you handle Plan B.” I believe that is the key to happiness in our lives if we take advantage of our talents and beliefs. I challenge each of you to become involved and help these organizations and our clients to continue to prosper.

In closing, many people contributed to my career and I thank each of you who molded me into the person who stands at the podium today. I thank the members of SFT and ACT who are always helpful and forward thinking to advance our discipline. I thank the practitioners who call to consult on cases. I thank the colleagues whom I work with daily in the teaching hospital. I thank the clients who graciously allow me to assist their animals. I thank the students and residents who challenge me to answer questions and often to think outside the box. And finally, thank you board members and officers for sharing your time, your talents and friendship with me and for continuing to grow and improve the organizations.