WHAT'S A THERIOGENOLOGIST?

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Invitation to present this lecture in honor of Dr. David E. Bartlett came as a pleasant but stupefying surprise. Any chance to aid in honoring Dr. Bartlett is a privilege not to be passed. But without doubt the invitation carries a certain connotation of senior status. Somehow I thought I had slipped by that segment of my career. Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity and challenge, with more than a little fear and trembling.

It seems it was only a few yesterdays ago when the time was the mid-1950's and I was a resident veterinarian at a ranch in Oklahoma, seasoned by a couple of years at a similar position in North Texas. It was an exciting time in the development of applications of frozen semen technology to practical field uses. I was doing exactly what I wanted to be doing, combining veterinary medicine, especially bull medicine and surgery and semenology, with modern beef and horse production. I was most fortunate to be working with Glynden T. Easley, one of the pioneers in beef cattle reproduction.

I was disturbed from my idyll one day, however, by a lengthy discussion with Harold Hill, one of the progenitors of a small group of veterinarians of a similar bent, the Rocky Mountain Society for the Study of Breeding Soundness in Bulls. Harold suggested the group had a lot to offer a clod like me.

I petitioned for membership and thus set out on a tortuous career pathway that was entwined at nearly every turn with that Society, which has evolved through the explosion of information in reproduction, and several name changes, to the Society for Theriogenology.

That evolution has provided a striking example of the reversal of extreme specialization, sometimes called diversification. Starting as bull doctors, in response to needs, we expanded quickly to include andrology of other species, still mostly other farm animals. In short order females of domestic species, then small animals and exotic species, both sexes, were added. The highly specialized group had diversified, even generalized, to a sustainable level of organizational strength. It was exhilarating to watch the valuable increase in political professional clout. Of course, along with the power came greater professional obligations.
Initially the Society had prerequisites for membership, primarily including practical experience and training in breeding soundness evaluation of bull and amounted to a couple of vouchers by current members--purposely but not overly exclusionary. In time, the changing makeup of the membership, along with various human rights movements, combined to move the Society to scrap all knowledge-based requirements for membership. Life was simpler.

In the meantime, organized veterinary medicine recognized the need for at least some specialty board certification and leaders of our Society, with no small amount of anguish and sweat, provided for the establishment of the American College of Theriogenologists. Detractors questioned repeatedly whether our specialty was broad enough to constitute a true discipline. The frequent insinuation was that our profession encompassed only medicine and surgery, none other. "And by the way, it can't even be both of those in the same person!" Elitism prevailed while client and patient waited the verdict of whether they constituted a medicine or surgery case. The hard-won battle for recognition of our discipline must never be forgotten.

The development of the College as a specialty board caused a new wave of much more academically oriented attempts to devise suitable certification procedures. Commendably, ACT led the way among veterinary specialty groups in crafting non-traditional channels of certification for practitioners. No doubt the fact that the early certification workers had dual membership in the Society, often from its early years, served as a major stimulus toward certification for all types of theriogenologists. One more example of the unique relationship between our two groups!

The developers of the certification criteria, appreciating the value of diversity, constructed a broad umbrella under which to contain a wide array of interests, accomplishments and talents. Theriogenology as a discipline has benefitted immensely from this fortunate foresight. Of necessity, the criteria had to be somewhat flexible. Detractors continued, "Once a mongrel, ---."

I must say that I enjoyed the singularity of purpose engendered by the Rocky Mountain Society. And it was born of necessity not because some planner was tinkering with a Manning document or administrative flow chart perhaps financed by a tempting grant. Still, that society's function was enhanced by becoming a larger, more diversified organization.

All along the way, meetings of the Society along with the College were marked by serious programming spiked with an informal atmosphere where veterinarians of quite dissimilar backgrounds and positions were eager to learn from each other.

Even as the two groups grew exponentially, that same feeling of camaraderie persists. Perhaps it has been diluted, though, and
it's too easy to notice grousing and obvious evidence of clique formation. The camaraderie is worth protecting.

All this reference to diversity and flexibility and umbrella raising could properly cause us to ask, "What's a theriogenologist?" No doubt the word itself has sparked that question to be directed to each of us. Without distillation, my answer here cannot be brief for practical use on the street corner.

One theriogenologist is a large animal practitioner constantly struggling to keep up with rapid advances in our discipline while integrating old and new information into the packages of services offered to clients.

One is a graduate student, fretfully working at the laboratory bench, to perfect an immunoassay.

One is a renowned researcher in the confines of a large pharmaceutical company.

One is a small animal practitioner who has an enduring interest in scientific but sensible breeding of dogs.

One is a college professor whose ambition, at first the major source of success in research into infectious infertility in mares, has now carried the professor to ever newer heights (should we say depths?) of academic administrative responsibility. We should appreciate such people. We need to have some of our own in high-and-deep places.

One is a dairy practitioner who knows that delivery of effective production medicine programs depends in a large measure on successful application of sound herd reproductive management. This practitioner, while respecting the risk of litigation associated with acting beyond limits of expertise, also knows that an effective job depends on performing a broad array of services.

One is a semenologist, chipping away at the stubborn nature of his/her subjects, the spermatozoa, who defy us all to try to develop definitive criteria for evaluation and diagnosis.

One is a veterinarian/wildlife conservationist who is responsible for the use of techniques suitable for repopulation of an endangered species.

One is a molecular biologist studying new approaches to cloning.

One is an embryo transfer entrepreneur, sagely defying the naysayers who suspect, but can't define its limitations.
One continues the arduous tasks of studying physical injuries and developmental defects in breeding bulls.

One pursues the collation and interpretation of laws, regulations and opinions affecting international shipment of semen and embryos.

One works at a stallion station, resolutely modifying breeding programs to meet budgetary fluctuations.

These characterizations are offered without reference to any particular person.

What do these theriogenologists have in common? Perhaps it is nothing more than membership in the Society and maybe the College in their respective but conjoined roles of providing a forum and conference and printed offerings whereby information is disseminated to the various types of theriogenologists. Beyond that --- the camaraderie. How ambitious would an examination committee have to be to approach the task of writing separate examinations for each type?

I would hope that theriogenologists of the future who enjoy the benefits of our groups, could have experiences similar to these:

The vision and basic instincts of Dave Bartlett.
The wit, wisdom and purity of spirit of John Simons.
The nose for truth and pattern for excellence of Lloyd Faulkner.
The academic devotion of Bill Wagner.
The original scientific thought and integrity of Bob Kenney.
The tireless devotion to organized veterinary medicine of Ed Mather.
The skill, frankness and thoughtfulness of Maarten Drost.
The enthusiasm of C.J. Bierschwal.
The strong mentorship and moral support of Don Walker.
The humanity and friendship of Charles Martin.
The remarkable second wind of Don Hudson.
The quiet competence of Edwin Robertson.
The literary tenacity and perpetually youthful spirit of Steve Roberts.

The very special friendship of Jan Weiler, Bob Garey and Don Ellerbee.

The memories of exceptional colleagues Dwight Wolfe, Bob Carson, Gatz Riddell, John Winkler, David McClary and John McCormack.

These will be remembered for their considerable scientific endeavors, but longer still for their human qualities.

My grandfather homesteaded a quarter section of arid land in far southwestern Oklahoma Territory before the turn of this century. It turned out to be his one and only federal grant proposal. His best asset turned out to be his consuming desire to learn a diversity of new things. For his first home he built a half dugout extended upward with layered slabs of sod he cut from the virgin prairie. He also earned hard cash by hand-digging water wells for neighbors. Only then did he return to North Texas to get his 16 year old bride who was to become the mother of ten. Together they made a farm and, in view of the obvious need for draft stock and cow ponies, he built a flourishing horse and mule raising operation.

In the 'teens, feeling the need for veterinary service which was nonexistent, he left the farm in charge of the wife and young brood and went away to Kansas City Veterinary College to attend a six weeks course for farmers.

He told me all about it on the eve of my entry into veterinary college. Perhaps because my father had recently died, maybe he felt I should know of the rigors ahead.

The anatomy class members went to the stockyards, bought the cheapest horses offered, led them alongside flatbed wagons, injected the jugular with strychnine and heaved the terminally spastic specimens onto the wagon/dissection tables. Dissection became a race with putrefaction. Only the stout-hearted could endure the final sessions. Anatomy II required a return trip to the horse pens.

His memories of the laboratory where they studied germs were most vivid. He described the syphilis germ, as seen under the microscope, as an especially ugly brute with long sharp teeth and hairy legs. "No wonder they do such damage!" Whether the professor had mounted some artist's concept of Dante's Inferno, or some arthropod, it's fun to guess. He certainly warned the more adventuresome against the evils of Kansas City.
Surgery took his greatest interest and he learned all he could about castrations, especially cryptorchids. He was to become the neighborhood horse gelder before veterinarians were available.

Typically for the time, his horse and mule business fell to the tractor. Farming often promised feast but yielded famine and he had to find outside income. Diversity prevailed! Always the farmer and stockman -- at least my grandmother was -- he also became a deputy U.S. marshal, a hospital administrator, a soft drink bottler, and a cotton ginner. It's possible I inherited my wanderlust. One might say that crosstraining served him well. Of course that was another era, but should we say today is more predictable?

A popular precept in veterinary education today is that we shouldn't teach that which won't be used. How economical! How efficient! How impossible to know what will be used. Have you had to change direction? Do all your acquaintances all give the same answer?

It's even suggested that if Corporate America were to use the educational tactics of our institutions, the result would be bankruptcy in a short time. (Petrow, 1992). Well, maybe so. I have spent a lot of time contrasting the business methods of the U.S. and its strongest rival, Japan, Inc. It seems that external analysts tend to overplay Japan's hard-working labor force, the typically long work week, worker efficiency, lifetime dedication to one company, alternate labor policies which guarantee uninterrupted employment and pointed neglect of family in deference to the workplace. These same analysts often ignore a highly successful labor practice, crosstraining. Some workers use little or none of the additional training but when it's needed, it can save a company. Bankruptcy? Show me. (Jackson, 1993).

With all this talk of diversity, one might think I have an unending quarrel with academia. Academic institutions are often unwieldy by nature. Bickering may take center stage. Not all this dissension is unexpected. Some of it is primitive warfare. the nature of the species. (Miller, 1992).

Controversy in veterinary education continues, as it should. (Wagner, 1992). However I have to believe that with all the brainpower in veterinary colleges, and with the dedication of some faculty members, that the proper thing will be done in the long run. Perhaps our organized groups should exert gentle persuasion at opportune times. Of course, we need to be sure we remain properly organized. Paul Greenburg, a political writer for a Little Rock, AR newspaper quoted the campaign manager of one of 1992's unsuccessful presidential candidates: "We are not disorganized! We just have a kind of organization that transcends understanding."(Greenberg, 1992).
It seems to me that we need to preserve and strengthen our unique confederation of strikingly diverse interests. I can't support a variety of certification examinations for the college. Species specialization is a viable and laudable reality. But ours is a discipline and shouldn't be subdivided into mini-societies and minicolleges expending all their energies on getting organized. Neither should we try to be little AABP or little AAEP. Once fragmentation is begun, where does it stop? Or does it?

Both groups need to support the stimulation of interest in candidacy for diplomate status in the College. The record here is good. I think candidates should master a comprehensive knowledge of the broad discipline. And, we must make them like it, or at least want it. Candidate input to a point is laudable but to stretch to the point where the several candidates decide on how much knowledge is required, and of what type and kind, defies logic. Whether comprehensive status is reached through a flexible comprehensive examination or by an extensive core examination, does not bother me.

Our two groups, with our numerous members from academia, have a tremendous opportunity to influence veterinary education. This is not to say that non-academic members should relegate responsibility in this area to the academicians. That practice has persisted too long.

We should repulse efforts to overuse hyphenated specialists. A theriogenologist-clinician, -equine practitioner, -endocrinologist? No. It seems to me that hyphens are properly categorized as typist's ways of ending a line or as barriers or obstacles along with teasing rails and corral gates.

Perhaps a little irreverence toward some of our own ideas is sometimes in order. I'm reminded of a story I read. A divorcée goes to her ex-husband's funeral. She's late and he's already been cremated. On the drive home, she stops the car and ceremoniously empties the ashtray.

There has been much concern of late about sustaining the financial health of the groups. In short, it may not take a hotel, the equivalent of the Taj Mahal, in the heart of a tourist trap (read that, Mecca) to attract attendees. Many remember when we scheduled our conferences at a hotel as close to the airport as possible.

I would caution about the importance of loyalty. Today most veterinarians belong to several organizations and therefore our leaders may also. It's up to us to be sure our leaders have the best interests of our groups ever in mind.
As a veterinarian, professor, committee member, voter, husband and father, I know better than to expect consensus agreement on any set of ideas such as these. And that's as it should be. So--take them, accept them, modify them, polish them or scuttle and replace them as needed. But thanks, ever so much for listening to them.

REFERENCES


