

## From the president: 'Change the Numbers'

By Emma Read, DVM, MVSc, DACVS



Dr. Emma Read

In March, I took my oldest daughter—an aspiring commercial pilot—to the 2022 International Women in Aviation Conference, where it was fascinating to watch how another industry recruits the best and brightest to come join them. Women make up just 9% of the aviation industry, so the organizers were working hard to encourage more students to follow in their footsteps and join their ranks.

In her keynote address, General Jacqueline Van Ovost, a four-star general who leads the military's global transportation network USTRANSCOM, spoke about honoring those who came before us and living up to the expectations they lay for us, working with and encouraging our colleagues with whom we stand shoulder to shoulder every day, and mentoring and paving the way for those who are coming up behind us. She spoke of our collective responsibility in a profession to plow the ground, straighten the path and create openings where there might not have been before. Long after our return from that conference, this talk stuck with me as I reflected on our profession.

Our equine veterinary profession is in crisis. We all know it. Many of you are struggling to find someone to hire for your practice. Those of you teaching in academic institutions like I do have watched the dwindling supply of students entering the field. The sad reality is that at the start of vet school, about 37% of students claim to want to enter equine practice; by final year, the number drops to about 5%; and at graduation, only 1.5% are hired into positions. Perhaps worst of all, within the first five years, 50% of these new colleagues will leave equine practice, many entering small animal practice instead.

Much has been learned from the work of the task force established in 2021 by the AAEP board of directors and chaired by Drs. Carol Clark and Rob Trimble. They interviewed 60 practice owners, new associates and students about the challenges facing equine practice and shared the results at last year's annual convention. In January, the board decided to act in three key areas to address these challenges: 1) convene a practitioners' summit, 2) focus on the issues with internships, and 3) establish a plan for enhanced mentorship programming.

Over several days in mid-May, I spent time with 19 colleagues from across the U.S. at a practitioners' summit organized by board member Dr. Jim Zeliff. He invited a representative from every VMG and from each Decade One group in the country, plus a few other ad hoc

members to make sure we had all the diversity of the profession represented. During two days of intense discussions geared towards finding a solution to our dire situation, hard conversations and brutal honesty took us to a place of prioritizing four things that all attendees believe are needed to transform equine practice into a more satisfying place for all to work:

1. **Compensation must increase.** Our veterinary graduates are entering practice with large debt loads—in some cases, \$200,000-300,000 plus. Their starting salaries are much lower than in the companion animal field while their workweeks are one to two days longer on average. They perform after-hours emergency call that most companion animal veterinarians pass off to established colleagues set up only for that purpose. All meeting attendees agreed that a variety of mechanisms will need to be employed to make it happen, but salaries must be raised to attract and retain our young talent.
2. **Emergency duty must be made manageable.** All equine practitioners need a manageable work-life balance to avoid burnout. A variety of on-call models were discussed and will be shared with members via AAEP's media channels. Innovative solutions must be found to protect and invest in the health and welfare of all our members.
3. **Scheduling must be flexible and allow for some autonomy.** All equine practitioners need to be able to prioritize family. Many of our predecessors lost marriages and relationships with other loved ones as a result of their dedication to the profession. Having meaningful relationships requires an investment of time and energy, so we need to avoid people being so tired after their workweek that they have nothing left to give; or having a workweek that never ends so they never recover. We need to prioritize working together and having time off that is truly time off.
4. **Mentorship needs to be provided in a variety of forms.** The older generations think of mentorship as having a wise older member informing a younger member, whereas many younger members want someone at the same stage of career to help support them through the tough times. The reality is that our young members can benefit from both types of support, and some older members want nothing short of the same thing too. As General Van Ovost pointed out, we need to stand shoulder to shoulder with our colleagues and help each other along, and we need to straighten the path for those who are coming after us. It wouldn't hurt to support them monetarily either, so we will be working to build scholarship support to help them pay back the cost of their education.

*continued on next page*

## From the president, continued

As we wrapped up the summit, we all coalesced around the idea that we needed to transform equine practice for ourselves, for our future colleagues and for the horse. Ensuring quality practitioners are there in years to come to care for our patients is priority one as we address this crisis. We agreed that we would start a campaign called “Change the Numbers.” We invite you to join in it with us. We want to increase recruitment, increase retention, and decrease those leaving our profession tired and burnt out. We want to decrease debt load and increase compensation, and make the hours spent working more effective and manageable. We want to increase the satisfaction rating of internship programs and increase the number of young colleagues having formal mentorship programs. Every

single person in the equine profession has a role to play—practice owners, associates, new graduates, interns, technical and support staff, students, horse owners as well as those in academia, industry and other ancillary roles.

AAEP is on a path to transform equine practice to honor those who came before us and their legacy, to lift up our struggling colleagues so they can keep pace beside us, and to pave the way for those who are coming behind us so they don’t have to trip and stumble like we did. We should be so lucky to have them be interested in doing what we are doing and want to join us. So please get involved and start to make a change in the numbers before the equine profession becomes just a sad old statistic.