

# Leveraging Your Time and Improving Your Practice with Veterinary Technicians

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## Abstract

Many changes occurring within the veterinary industry have caused a reassessment of traditional food and mixed animal practice procedures and norms. Fewer graduates interested in these practice areas have increased the focus on this topic today. Some groups lament the lack of adequate numbers of veterinary graduates while conflicting groups have discerned that the amount of veterinary care available is appropriate. Veterinary technicians are educated, licensed, capable professionals whose role has been morphing and expanding in recent years. Small animal practices have integrated these technicians into their business model successfully, yet many practitioners have not yet embraced the benefits others have noted. Mixed animal practices offer perhaps the easiest entry for a licensed technician since duties can often be flexibly changed between species as their job description expands and additional training occurs. Many DVM's are finding that their billable professional time is substantially increased with the addition of licensed staff who are able to work under indirect as well as direct supervision. This has added to the bottom line in many instances. Careful attention to the law of the state of residence will help guide the process of integrating these professionals into a changing practice environment.

## Introduction

There has been increasing pressure within the veterinary industry to provide expanded services to our clients. In food animal medicine, this has been somewhat more difficult due to changing fiscal realities for our clients as well as for our hospitals. Attempting to work harder and smarter has been the axiom for most practitioners, yet, there are still only 24 hours in a day. Small animal practitioners have had a head start on leveraging their time by the efficient use of talented licensed veterinary technicians in their practices. These veterinarians are busy seeing patients during office hours while licensed technicians are 10 feet away capably performing anesthesia, dental prophylaxis, laboratory procedures, radiography and ultrasonography to

augment services offered as well as quickly add to the bottom line. Many large and mixed animal practices have traditionally found it difficult to cost-effectively utilize licensed technicians in their practice. Often times they have hired "drivers", truck cleaners, stockers and an extra pair of hands. Veterinarians are often left to do "technician type" work for a portion of their day, thereby decreasing the amount of time available to perform DVM services. Frequently, large animal and mixed animal practices have added veterinary positions to make emergency duty less demanding instead of technician positions that might be more appropriate. It may not make good business sense to have veterinarians doing technician type duties on a regular basis, and may be an additional reason why attracting veterinary graduates to enter food or mixed animal practice has become quite difficult.

## Licensing and Duties

Duties of licensed technicians have been changing over the last number of years. Schools of veterinary technology have been making a special effort to accommodate students with large animal interests and backgrounds, state licensing regulations are being clarified and in some cases expanded to better explain the types of work that licensed technicians may do within a large animal practice. Many technology schools now have a significant portion of their curriculum dedicated to training capable people for large animal practice.

Dairy practice in particular has been evolving from the traditional "fire engine" practice to a "consulting, surveillance and monitoring" approach in many areas of the country. Licensed technicians can and do assist practices that are somewhere "on this curve" as they attempt to change to better assist the industry. Stevenson<sup>2</sup> has reported on some of the changing duties for which licensed technician graduates have been trained. Day and Kral<sup>1</sup> have shown one approach to integrating "Bovine Practitioner Technician" duties into their cutting edge consulting practice. Interest in this area has been high and many practices are making changes similar to those that have been reported. There are many more practices reluctant to delegate these re-

sponsibilities for a variety of reasons, such as client perceptions, practice history, technician practice act interpretation, cost/benefit concerns, regional differences, etc. We would like to create an ongoing discussion so that all concerns might be discussed and understood.

### Mixed Animal Practice Implementation

In some ways, a mixed animal practice possibly offers the easiest and most flexible integration of licensed technicians into a practice. Since others have discussed "Bovine Practitioner Technicians", it is appropriate to present a slightly different approach that we have found to be both financially and professionally successful in a mixed animal environment. We have recruited CVTs (Certified Veterinary Technicians) to our practice who have an interest in companion animal medicine as well as one or more large animal species. Their time is divided between the small animal hospital, large animal hospital and large animal ambulatory duties. Our practice has been aggressively training the CVTs to operate independently in the ambulatory portion of our practice (i.e. alone in a vehicle with a cell phone) by having them perform ALL of the duties that they can legally perform in our state(s).

In our practice there are two full time DVMs and five CVTs. We also have four non-licensed, but well trained assistants. We are careful to differentiate the duties between these groups. There are three vehicles available for the DVMs and CVTs to share. Our CVTs are encouraged to specialize in specific species areas where they have interest and experience. We believe that our hospital policy of accepting externs from both technician and DVM programs, as well as a commitment to lifelong learning and advancement amongst our entire professional staff, have been the primary reasons why we have successfully recruited and retained excellent people in a small corner of rural America. Our Hospital Administrator/Head Technician is a CVT with 26 years of experience (14 years with us), and is actively involved with two AAHA advisory boards.

Two other CVTs are equine/small animal oriented individuals and the remaining two grew up on farms and have dairy/small animal interests. These two CVTs are also trained AI technicians. All five CVTs are excellent companion animal technicians and were actively seeking a practice where they could continue their careers with their species of choice. With a busy mixed animal practice, we have found that this mix of personnel has provided us enough flexibility to be light on our feet with scheduling both hospital and ambulatory work. Below are brief descriptions of duty areas.

The *equine section* of our practice is limited to daytime care, by appointment, unless hospitalized at our facility. This lends itself to a cost effective "Equine

Wellness Program" offered by our CVTs. Much like a PA or nurse practitioner in human medicine, all routine vaccinations, blood draws and coggins testing is accomplished by our CVTs who travel individually yet have immediate cell phone contact with the DVMs. They also spend time discussing deworming strategies (not prescribing), dispensing nutritional information and general care issues. They collect fecal samples routinely for fecal egg counts to help us assess the deworming programs in place. If they encounter an issue that requires DVM intervention, an appointment is made to bring the horse in to the hospital, or possibly for a farm visit. The equine industry in our area is 98% backyard pleasure horses, and prior to offering this service many owners were either skipping vaccinations or ordering them through a catalog and self administering. This program has offered our practice area a reasonable, yet high quality alternative.

Our *bovine practice* is limited to dairies that have an ongoing herd health program with us. As a result, the DVMs are on these facilities regularly and have a valid veterinary, client, patient/herd relationship at all times. Most of these businesses handle 98% of their after-hours work on their own. We have an ongoing training program and SOPs on these farms to help them deal with the "routine" emergencies. Our CVTs have differing roles on these farms, depending on farm needs. Many of their duties involve assisting with the monitoring or testing programs in place. Blood and fecal testing for Johne's control and BVD surveillance are common projects. Urine collection and testing for Lepto Hardjo, milk sample collection and records download into Dairy Comp 305 are typical activities. Some of our dairies have found themselves with a lack of qualified labor to accomplish vaccination programs, BST injections, reproductive program injections and medical treatments (prescribed by the DVM). These are the types of services our practice provides for our clients, and the list seems to be continually expanding and changing.

Our *companion animal practice* is a three year AAHA accredited facility that has a fairly complete laboratory, ultrasonography (LA and SA machines), endoscopy, etc. Our CVTs induce and monitor all anesthetic protocols prescribed by the DVM, do all treatments, dispense medications and perform lab work. CVTs place catheters, perform all blood draws and administer many vaccinations after appropriate physical exams are performed by the DVM. All CVTs are cross trained to the front office and conduct much of the client education.

The *fee structure* for this program is the following: CVT farm visit charges are two-thirds of a DVM call and hourly rates are one-half of the DVM rate. Fees on the small animal side incorporate professional time for the CVTs as well as the DVM. At these rates, it is cost effective for our practice to add CVT hours to our staff-

ing any time that a DVM finds him/herself performing technician type duties rather than practicing medicine.

We are now producing significantly more as a two DVM, five CVT facility than we did with three DVMs and two CVTs (gross and net). I would challenge that, in many areas of the country, DVM's are frequently performing technician duties for a significant portion of their day, and that there is not so much a shortage of food animal practitioners, but a shortage of practitioners willing to delegate technician duties. I would like to suggest that veterinarians will be happier, better compensated and more professionally fulfilled if adequately supported by licensed veterinary technicians in the large animal arena as in companion animal practices. We might even be more successful attracting graduates to this type of practice.

### Legal Aspects

Implementation of these types of CVT activities into your practice is directly affected by the state(s) in which you practice and the laws that apply to licensed technicians. As reported by Stevens<sup>2</sup>, there is a significant difference between immediate, direct and indirect supervision and it is important to distinguish the types of activities being performed and the type of supervision needed. To add to this chaos, there are many differences in veterinary technician practice acts. For instance, the State of California does not distinguish between immediate and direct supervision, Ohio has Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVTs) and they can perform "routine management practices" on food animals (castration, dehorning, removing tails, etc.), whereas these are considered surgical procedures in some states and must be performed by a DVM (or an untrained farm hand). New York only allows three technicians per supervising DVM. Our practice is in both New York and Pennsylvania, meaning that three CVTs may not be over the border at any time unless both

DVM's are available. Of course, in New York they become Veterinary Technicians rather than CVTs. These very few differences presented are the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" and have added to the complexity of hiring, training and utilizing technicians.

Stevenson<sup>2</sup> reported that we all need to be very careful to not mislead the public into mistaking CVTs for DVMs, that they need to be licensed and under control of a DVM, they are competent for the task at hand and they not break any state law. I would submit that utilizing a well trained, licensed, supervised veterinary technician in a judicious manner does more for the health and welfare of our patients than ignoring these additional client/patient needs or allowing untrained individuals to perform these duties. It turns out that it also is good business.

### Conclusions

Any changes which happen within a profession are prone to dissection and discussion by interested parties, and it is important that pertinent laws be carefully adhered to with the introduction of programs such as these. It is also noteworthy that each state regulates veterinary technicians differently, and border issues need to be carefully assessed. Even with these "speed bumps", it is obvious that the role of the veterinary technician will continue to be defined and expanded. Expanding abilities will result in additional responsibilities for these professionals and the rewards to the industry will be great.

### References

1. Day JD, Kral J: Increasing your practice's output and better serving your clients utilizing a veterinarian/technician team approach. *Proc Am Assoc Bov Pract* 35:142-144, 2002.
2. Stevenson D: Thinking outside the box: utilizing veterinary technicians in food animal practice. *Proc Am Assoc Bov Pract* 35:139-141, 2002.