



ROOM FOR GROWTH

The racial demographic profile of the veterinary profession fails to reflect that of the pet-owning population.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Kristi Fender

Examining Racial Diversity in the Profession

Camille White, a third-year veterinary nursing student at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, is used to being the only Black person in her classes by now. But that doesn't mean she has found it to be an easy road—especially early on in the program.

“It's been difficult. I'm not going to lie,” says White, who grew up in Indianapolis. “Walking into the classroom, the first thing I would notice is that I was the only Black person—each and every time. I try to take my mind off it, but it's hard knowing that no one there can really relate to me or feel what I feel.”

Kristi Fender, former editor of *dvm360* magazine, has spent 20 years covering animal health and veterinary medicine. She holds a master's degree in journalism from the University of Kansas and lives in Shawnee, Kansas, with her family, including 2 feisty shelter rescues: an old shepherd mix and a young calico-tabby.



Her situation could be considered reflective of the profession as a whole. As is true for veterinarians (who top the list of what *The Atlantic* called “the whitest jobs in America”),¹ there are far fewer veterinary nurses/technicians of color than would be needed for the profession to mirror the pet-owning population. While the reasons for this lack of diversity are complex and awareness of the need for change is growing, experts say complacency with the status quo risks the vibrancy and wellbeing of the profession. What’s more, it could endanger the health of the pets veterinary professionals care for with such passion and dedication.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that 92% of veterinary technicians are white, 10% are Hispanic or Latino, 3% are Black or African American, and 1% are Asian.² (Keep in mind that totals surpass 100 since people can select more than one response to questions about racial identity; also, the BLS may define “veterinary technician” differently than readers of *Today’s Veterinary Nurse*). Similarly, about 92% of veterinarians are white as well. In contrast, 28% of pet owners are members of the “multicultural” population segment (which includes Black, Hispanic, and Asian pet owners), and this sector is growing much more rapidly than the white pet-owning population, according to a report from trend-analysis firm Packaged Facts.³ This imbalance is not healthy, experts say.

Paige Allen, MS, RVT, is president of the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) board of directors and assistant director of veterinary advising and recruiting at Purdue, which requires all veterinary medicine graduates to complete a diversity certificate program. If the veterinary profession cannot reach out to diverse communities in a way that encourages and models involvement in the profession, “it’s going to affect our ability to serve those communities,” Allen says. “And it’s going to affect our ability to serve their pets and provide good healthcare across the board.”

CHALLENGES FOR MINORITIES

White says her insecurities about not fitting in are intensified when people avoid talking to her about the fact that she’s Black. Race and ethnicity are touchy subjects, and majority students may feel safer simply adopting a “color-blind” approach—which has the unintended effect of making people of color feel even more alone and isolated.

“I haven’t had too many people be open with me about diversity,” she says. “No one really asks me questions.”

To cope, White tries not to let assumptions about what others think of her take over her mind, especially thoughts that lead her to believe she’s less-than. She also enjoys a few points of connection with people who “see” her: the technician at the teaching hospital who asks about her hair, another technician at the clinic who’s Black, a Black veterinary student (with whom she can “talk like I talk”), and her advisor, who asks regularly how she’s doing and makes sure she’s okay. White also gets involved with diversity initiatives on campus to help develop solutions to the challenges she’s faced.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

When asked why diversity in veterinary medicine has been so lacking historically, Harold Davis, RVT, VTS (ECC, Anesthesia & Analgesia), says it’s a complex issue. But one of the most significant reasons, he believes, is the lack of role models.

“It’s kind of a dilemma,” says Davis, who spent many of his 43 years in the profession at the University of California, Davis, veterinary teaching hospital and is now president-elect of the NAVC and treasurer of the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America. “You have to get more people in the profession communicating and visible out in public, but how do you do that until you drive more people *to* the profession?”

Organizations that he belongs to, such as the National Association of Black Veterinarians (NABV) and the Black DVM Network (both of which welcome veterinary nurses/technicians), are working on this.

“NABV has membership for junior high and high school students,” Davis says. “The other thing we need to do with minority students, with the goal of generating a pipeline for veterinary nursing, is to provide age-appropriate literature and media to students in K through 12. I think high school may be too late. We need to start early.”

In fact, creating a healthier pipeline for diverse veterinary professionals may be a boon to the profession as a whole, considering the looming veterinarian shortage many experts are predicting for the next 10 years. Last year’s Pet Healthcare Industry Summit hosted virtually by Banfield Pet Hospital made



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this a focus, with the company releasing findings of an internal study indicating that 75 million U.S. pets may lack access to veterinary care by 2030. To help meet this need, Banfield announced a number of initiatives to boost diversity in the profession, including a goal for 30% of its veterinarian and paraprofessional population to be Black, indigenous, or people of color by 2030, according to a company release.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Garnetta Santiago, MA, LVT, manager of academic and professional affairs at Zoetis, doesn't mince words when it comes to what the veterinary technology profession has to lose if complacency with the status quo continues into the future.

"We're losing out on the richness that comes from diversity. Point blank," she says. "As veterinary professionals, we all take an oath to do the absolute best for our patients. By not having a population that reflects the people we are serving, we are in essence saying, we don't fully see you. There are implications for the animal receiving care. There are also implications for the profession not understanding how rich this tapestry is. Every single time one of us engages with someone who has a different background, there is an opportunity for us to learn something, to grow in some area."

Santiago says the profession is basically cheating itself by not having a workforce that reflects the diversity of its clientele.

"If I walk into a business or a clinic and I don't see anyone who reflects me, I don't feel part of it," she says. "It's not that I don't have as much of an interest in my dog being flea-free as anyone else—I'm just not likely to go back there."

Santiago runs a podcast called Scrub Chat for Zoetis, and one of her interviewees is Dr. Venaya Jones, the first Black woman to own a veterinary clinic in the city where Santiago grew up, Cleveland.

"I never saw a Black vet the entire time I lived in Cleveland," she says. "So, I interviewed her and got to know why and how she got to where she was."

Santiago was struck by the fact that Dr. Jones emphasized her cultural background as part of the marketing for her clinic. By positioning herself as a "Black veterinarian," Santiago says that Jones created further access to veterinary services, illustrating how expanded diversity in the profession impacts the care animals receive.

"I thought it was interesting because a white veterinarian doesn't get advertised as a white veterinarian," she says. "But that was part of her journey. And it was also part of making veterinary medicine accessible to people who likely would not take their animal to the vet because they don't feel the service is for them. This is an honorable, noble profession, and there's a seat at the table for everybody in this country." **TVN**

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