Making Strides Toward Optimal Utilization

The veterinary nursing/technician profession continues to grapple with such issues as lack of job satisfaction, low wages, lack of professional respect, limited career advancement, and underutilization. Results from multiple surveys conducted over the past 30 years support these trends.

The 2016 NAVTA Demographic Survey reported that “the top 6 most significant problems that face individuals as credentialed veterinary technicians include low income, burnout, lack of recognition and career advancement, the underutilization of skills, and the competition with on-the-job trained technicians.”

The AVMA Task Force on Veterinary Technician Utilization
To address the ongoing issues with the profession of veterinary technology, the AVMA Task Force on Veterinary Technician Utilization was formed in May 2019.

The Task Force was directed “to develop a plan to improve veterinary technician utilization while recognizing the profession’s challenges of financial and career sustainability, effective task delegation, and the wellbeing of both the veterinary technician and the practice.” The Task Force provided a 22-page report to the AVMA Board of Directors at the end of December 2019. The report has not been made available to the public at time of press; however, a summary of the Task Force recommendations was published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association January 2020 issue.

The AVMA Working Group on Veterinary Technician Utilization
In March 2020, the AVMA Working Group on Veterinary Technician Utilization was created. The Working Group was tasked to identify and, if possible, verify with data a causal relationship between factors found in the veterinary healthcare culture that create significant barriers to appropriate credentialed veterinary technician utilization.

The Working Group met virtually for the first time in March 2020 and from there defined 3 goals:
- Formulate logical, rational hypotheses to test causality of inappropriate credentialed veterinary technician utilization
- Define and develop an instrument for evaluating veterinary technician utilization to be used in testing hypotheses formed in Goal 1
- Investigate whether state regulation of the veterinary technician profession affects utilization
Three subgroups were established with each of the group members participating in 2 of the 3 subgroups and the Working Group chair participating in all 3. The subgroups met virtually weekly for 5 weeks; then the full Working Group reconvened in June 2020 to review the work done by each subgroup. The Working Group drafted a report with recommendations to be sent to the AVMA Board of Directors in July 2020. The report has not been made available to the public.

**Potential Barriers to Utilization**

Lack of knowledge, liability, negative past experiences, and lack of trust can be considered barriers to the utilization or underutilization of veterinary nurses/technicians. Many veterinarians appear to be unaware of the education, knowledge, and technical skills necessary to earn a degree in veterinary technology or obtain a Veterinary Technician Specialty.

Some veterinarians express concern for their own liability should an error or accident occur while a veterinary nurse/technician is performing a procedure. Some may say they can perform the procedure more quickly themselves rather than delegating down, not taking into consideration the potential long-term financial benefit to the practice and themselves. Past negative experiences should not be a barrier to utilization. However, negative experiences often are roadblocks to implementation. Talking about what went wrong, how it could have been avoided, and training and practice under direct supervision can build trust and allow for proper utilization. Perhaps the most significant barrier to utilization is a lack of trust. Veterinarians who do not trust a veterinary nurse/technician are unlikely to delegate to that individual. Veterinary nurses/technicians who do not trust a veterinarian are unlikely to ask for more responsibility.

**Benefits of Proper Utilization**

Optimal utilization allows veterinarians to see more patients and enables them to focus their time on the tasks that require a veterinary license, such as diagnosing, prescribing, and performing surgical procedures. Studies have also shown substantial economic benefit when veterinary practices utilize credentialed veterinary technicians.3,4

Additionally, optimal patient care and client service are the primary benefits of the proper utilization of veterinary nurses/technicians. Veterinary nurses/technicians often work closely with patients in the veterinary hospital and may be the first to notice changes in patient status. Those who are encouraged to make informed decisions within the parameters of the doctors’ orders when caring for their patients are more fulfilled in their jobs and are strong patient advocates.

It has been theorized (and the author believes) that when veterinary nurses/technicians are encouraged to continue to learn, grow professionally, and use the technical skills they are trained to perform, they are generally
happier and more likely to stay with the practice than those who are only allowed to do less interesting tasks.\textsuperscript{5} Individuals who are satisfied in their role, feel respected, and are valued as a team member are more likely to hold themselves and others accountable. Such teams often develop effective communication and problem-solving skills, which promote a well-run veterinary hospital, optimal patient care, and exceptional client service.

**Promoting Utilization**

There are easy ways to start the conversation about effective, optimal use of veterinary nurses/technicians at your hospital by involving the whole team. Do not fall into the trap of, “We have always done it this way.” Evaluate one procedure at a time. Ask, “Are tasks falling to the lowest-paid team member who is legally allowed to perform the job?” Optimal veterinary nurse/technician utilization includes effectively using veterinary assistants, which allows veterinary nurses/technicians to focus on tasks that require additional education and advanced skill. Stratification of labor also makes good economic sense for the practice.

Next, ask if there is a written protocol or standard operating procedure describing how to correctly and safely perform the task. Have team members been trained to perform the task following the written guidelines? Veterinary professionals often enjoy teaching others. Helping others to learn can be very rewarding for the instructor. Team members who enjoy teaching could be encouraged to give in-hospital lectures and hands-on labs.

Consider what tools or support you need to advance your or your teams’ knowledge, skills (including soft skills), and abilities. Ask the leadership of your organization how you can obtain what you need to become more effective. Better yet, create a proposal of what it might take to meet your goals and how it will benefit the hospital or organization and present this to hospital leadership.

When all members of the veterinary healthcare team are utilized to their fullest potential, everyone wins. Team members feel appreciated and empowered, patients receive excellent medical care, hospital revenue increases, and client service and compliance improve. Start the conversation at your hospital today. \textit{TVN}

**References**