



The Risk of Apprenticeships in Veterinary Nursing: A Comprehensive Examination



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The veterinary nursing field is undergoing transformational changes, as pet care continues to be increasingly valued by society. One major topic of debate is the proposed introduction of apprenticeship pathways for licensing veterinary nurses, which emphasize experience-based learning rather than traditional academic credentialing.

The Washington State Veterinary Board of Governors recently approved an apprenticeship pathway to credentialing, which is opposed by the Washington State Association of Veterinary Technicians, the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association, NAVTA, and the AVMA. While proponents argue that apprenticeships offer accessibility and hands-on experience, I contend that the drawbacks outweigh the benefits when considering the impact to public safety, professional standards, and the long-term elevation of the profession.

Public Safety at Risk

The most compelling argument against apprenticeships is the potential compromise to public safety. Veterinary nurses have a range of responsibilities, including administering medications and anesthesia, managing postsurgical recovery, assessing patient status and responses, and autonomously carrying out treatment plans. Mistakes in these areas can have grave consequences, affecting the wellbeing of patients and causing emotional distress for pet owners.

Apprenticeships often lack the rigorous, structured educational component that comes with formal academic training. Even if an experienced mentor supervises an apprentice, there’s no guarantee that the apprenticeship will cover every aspect of veterinary nursing comprehensively, including the equivalent knowledge and skills established by the AVMA’s Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities.

An apprenticeship’s quality can also vary widely depending on the mentor’s expertise and the clinic’s available resources. Unlike accredited academic programs, which have standardized curricula and are subject to regular evaluations, apprenticeships are not universally regulated. This inconsistency creates a potential risk to public safety, as poorly trained veterinary nurses could make critical errors in animal care.



The Question of Professional Standards

Currently, licensure for veterinary nurses typically requires graduation from an accredited program and passing a board-approved examination. This standardization ensures a minimum level of knowledge and skills across the profession. The introduction of apprenticeship pathways dilutes these standards by offering an alternative that doesn't require formal education.

The dilution of professional standards is problematic for 2 reasons. First, it creates a disparity within the profession between those who have completed formal education and those who have not. Second, this can lead to public confusion about what qualifications to look for when seeking veterinary care, potentially eroding trust in the profession.

Hindered Professional Growth

For years, the veterinary healthcare industry has worked to elevate the role and perception of veterinary nurses. Formal educational requirements and licensure are important steps toward gaining the public's trust and validating the profession's complexity. Introducing an apprenticeship-based pathway could undermine these efforts by giving the impression that academic preparation is optional for veterinary nurses, limiting the roles and responsibilities they can assume, and ultimately hindering the profession's advancement.

An apprenticeship pathway can also hinder the professional growth of the individual, since veterinary nurses credentialing through this pathway will, in most cases, not be able to receive their license in other states because they will not meet the typical requirements of an accredited program degree. This prevents these individuals from being able to practice as a veterinary nurse throughout multiple states.

Veterinary nurses who pursue apprenticeship pathways will also lose out on career opportunities that require educational degrees as a required qualification.

Arguments for Apprenticeships: A Closer Look

1. Accessibility: Proponents argue that apprenticeships make the profession more accessible, offering a pathway for those who cannot afford formal education. While this argument has merit, accessibility should not compromise the core principles of public safety and professional standards. Measures like scholarships or subsidized training programs could provide a solution without lowering the bar for entry into the profession.

2. Hands-on experience: Advocates of apprenticeships say that these programs provide invaluable hands-on experience. However, accredited academic programs also include clinical rotations, offering supervised, hands-on proficiency in addition to a structured academic framework. This dual approach provides a more comprehensive education that better prepares veterinary nurses for the challenges they will face.

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3. Speed to market: Another argument in favor of apprenticeships is that they allow for a quicker entry into the workforce. While it's true that apprenticeships can be completed in a shorter timeframe, the fast track isn't necessarily the best track, especially when the stakes include the wellbeing of animals and the peace of mind of their owners.

4. Mentorship: The apprenticeship model offers mentorship from experienced professionals. While mentorship is valuable, it can be integrated into academic programs without being the sole basis for education and licensure, as well as pursued at any time after graduation. Additionally, the quality of mentorship can vary widely, introducing another element of inconsistency.

The High Road of Formal Education

When it comes to the education of veterinary professionals, there is wisdom in taking the high road. Formal educational pathways offer several distinct advantages over apprenticeships:

1. Comprehensive curriculum: Formal education offers a broad curriculum that encompasses both theoretical knowledge and clinical skills, providing a well-rounded education that apprenticeships may lack.

2. Standardization: Accredited programs go through rigorous evaluation processes to maintain quality, ensuring that graduates meet nationally recognized standards.

3. Ethical and legal training: Formal education provides training on ethical considerations and legal responsibilities, preparing graduates to navigate the complexities of veterinary healthcare with integrity.

4. Advanced specialization: Formal education offers the possibility for advanced studies and specialization, opening doors for career progression that may be limited through apprenticeship pathways.

5. Public perception: Graduating from an accredited program and passing a standardized exam sends a strong message to the public about the professionalism and expertise of veterinary nurses, thus garnering greater public trust.

While apprenticeships in veterinary nursing may appear to offer benefits like accessibility and hands-on experience, the risks they pose to public safety, professional standards, and the long-term elevation of the profession make them a less desirable pathway.

As the responsibilities of veterinary nurses continue to expand, it's critical that educational and licensure requirements keep pace to ensure the highest level of care for animals and the wellbeing of society. **TVN**

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