



Defining Veterinary Professionalism: A Collaborative Effort



Before writing this article, I asked veterinary students around the country their opinions regarding professionalism in veterinary medicine. Specifically, I asked members of the Millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 2005*) what it means to be a veterinary professional.

More than 75% responded with rolling eyes and comments such as, “Oh no! Are you going to give us a lecture on texting in class and how we should cover our tattoos when we meet with clients?” Only after I convinced them I would not go on a tirade with a list of rules and expected behaviors were they willing to discuss the topic.

Care & Concern

I learned many things from those conversations.

First, members of the newest generation of veterinary professionals are deeply concerned about the profession’s future and its standing in society, but cannot articulate how professionalism may play a role. Second, they are tired of being given lists of do’s and don’ts without discussing the *why* behind them. They are unsure what it means to be a professional and which behaviors matter; many attribute this uncertainty to a lack of good role models and mentorship.

Following our discussion, I reflected on my own contribution to the students’ confusion. How often had I scolded them for texting in class? How had I approached conversations about what I deemed inappropriate professional attire? Did I ever move past my anger about their clothing choices and take the time to explain why professional

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dress matters? Could I articulate what it means to be a “veterinary professional” in a meaningful way?

I was guilty of doing what we so often do with young people—making assumptions about behavior without considering what is underneath.¹

Coming Together

I realized that my questions and my students’ experiences were similar to those of our profession’s researchers.² So, how do we—seasoned practitioners and the next generation—come together to define “veterinary professional” in a way that will build our esteem in the eyes of our society?

Literature that supports a definition of veterinary medical professionalism is scarce, but the human medical field helps us see beyond rules and behaviors as the foundation for professionalism.³ The authors of the article, “More Than a List of Values and Desired Behaviors: A Foundational Understanding of Medical Professionalism,” propose this definition: “Medical professionalism is a *belief system* about how best to organize and deliver health care, which calls on group members to jointly declare (‘profess’) what the public

and individual patients can expect regarding shared competency standards and ethical values and to implement trustworthy means to ensure that all medical professionals live up to these promises.”⁴

Shared Standards

This statement addresses the importance of setting standards and gets to the crux of the issue, the part that frustrates many Millennials. While establishing behaviors for appropriate professional conduct is important, especially for accountability, developing a shared belief system around the larger question of public trust is critical.

To do this, veterinary professionals must come together to continually *define, debate, declare, distribute, and enforce* the shared competency standards and ethical values that govern our work. I suggest the following statements should steer our conversations.

1. Veterinarians should set the standard for the delivery of veterinary medicine to the client.
2. Veterinarians should define the technical and ethical standards that the public can expect from our profession.

3. Veterinarians should implement accountability strategies to ensure that all team members live up to these standards.

Veterinary medical professionalism is difficult to define, hard to teach, and even more challenging to evaluate. Rules and behaviors are important and should be discussed, but a broader view would serve us well. Instead of rolling our eyes, we need to work together to define “veterinary professional” and engage, rather than alienate, the Millennial generation. ■

Editor's note: Dr. Betsy Charles is passionate about helping veterinary professionals become influential in veterinary medicine. She combines her work as Veterinary Leadership Institute executive director with her position as a Western University of Health Sciences assistant professor to make a difference in the profession.

*The years for Millennials may differ slightly among sources.

References

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