

# VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University



## Labor of Love

*Attracting and keeping veterinarians in livestock careers.*

Just as cattle ranching is a lifestyle and a labor of love, veterinarians who serve ranching clients also see their career as a positive lifestyle choice. But, in order to attract young veterinarians to rural communities to serve livestock clients — and then to retain them in those communities — their short-term and long-term needs must be met.

Many rural areas in the United States report shortages of veterinarians. Several recent surveys and focus-group discussions addressing the problem have identified factors that are associated with the reasons veterinarians move to rural communities to serve livestock clients and reasons why they leave those communities.

One challenge facing rural communities trying to recruit veterinarians is that those who grew up in a rural community are more likely to be attracted to and stay in rural veterinary practice; and the rural population as a proportion of the total population is on a steady decline. In the past, most veterinarians who became livestock veterinarians grew up farming and ranching and sought careers that would allow them to support animal agriculture. Because the pool of new veterinarians who have a rural life experience is shrinking, veterinary

practices, rural communities and livestock producers must be prepared to provide a positive environment for young veterinarians to acclimate to a rural environment.

A recent article from the American Association of Bovine Practitioners addressing why young veterinarians choose a career focused on serving cattle producers reported one of the most important and consistent reasons practitioners stay in rural practice is because they love the industry and their clients.

A study done at Kansas State University found young veterinarians in rural practices were satisfied with their compensation and work they did on a daily basis, but other aspects of their careers were less positive.

### Challenges

One of the reasons young veterinarians report they have left rural practice or could see themselves moving away from serving livestock clients is the risk of becoming injured. This very real possibility can be addressed with good working facilities and chutes and good animal handling skills. Many veterinary clinics have upgraded their working facilities to optimize safety, and veterinarians have the same expectation for their clients' facilities.

Other reasons young veterinarians

identified as reasons they would leave rural practice include limited career opportunities for their spouse, difficulty finding child care and a lack of friends and peers.

Even though many young veterinarians who join a livestock practice grew up in a rural community, they don't have lifelong relationships in their new community. Unless the other veterinarians in the practice, their clients and the community as a whole work together to establish the types of bonds they experienced in their own hometown, the positive aspects of a small, close-knit community will be lacking.

Many of the young veterinarians surveyed expressed the need for their new clients and community to see them as a whole person beyond their veterinary role. They are looking for camaraderie, mentorship and networking in all aspects of their life — and cattle producers who want to build those types of relationships with young veterinarians will help ensure they will have valuable veterinary resources (and great people) in their communities for many years. **A**

*Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.*