

Putting Veterinary Education into Practice

By Dean Herb Whiteley

The veterinary curriculum at Illinois is undergoing a metamorphosis, and partnerships at veterinary practices like yours will play an important role.

Beginning with the enrollment of the Class of 2012 in fall 2008, we will introduce a revised curriculum designed to give students more clinical exposure throughout the program, greater flexibility in pursuing individual areas of interest, and more practical experience.

The practical experience part is where you come in. As part of their clinical rotations, all students will be required to arrange two four-week, for-credit externships at a primary care practice. The goal is for students to get a better feel for practice management and to see more primary care cases than they would encounter at our Urbana teaching hospital.

If you are interested in contributing to the education of Illinois students, you can register your practice online to participate (see sidebar). These primary care rotations were recently approved for elective credit, so you can host a student now, even before the new curriculum takes effect.

The revised curriculum also establishes separate two-week rotations for both small animal and large animal ICU evening and graveyard shifts. This change formalizes ICU training and eliminates overlapping ICU night coverage with daytime duties,

improving safety for students and patients. Students will be able to focus on quality of medicine in ICU, learning to perform routine catheter care, calculate fluids, and so forth.

In order to make room in the curriculum for these new practice-focused requirements, we will be introducing a 16-month clinical “year”—and cutting back the pre-clinical material to keep the four-year degree. Faculty are taking a hard look at core courses in the first three years to trim out information that is redundant or not deemed to be core for producing competent, entry-level veterinarians.

“We are asking faculty in the pre-clinical years to make courses more clinically oriented and more practical,” says Dr. Jonathan Foreman, who stepped into the role of associate dean for academic and student affairs on July 1, after being heavily involved in the curriculum review process over the past year.

“We’ve had a real paradigm shift in how most of the faculty view their courses,” notes Dr. Foreman. “Faculty are recognizing how their courses fit within the overall curriculum to produce competent veterinarians. We are viewing the curriculum as a living entity that is continually evolving.”

The College Courses and Curriculum Committee has been charged with oversight of this process. A new assistant dean for academic affairs and curriculum will be selected soon to serve as a liaison to the committee responsible for curriculum content review and evaluation and to coordinate and schedule courses, clinical rotations, and external practice rotations.

Dr. Foreman estimates that more than 30 existing core courses will have to be revised to address the curricular changes. Some material cut from core courses will be

moved to elective courses so that interested students can still benefit from the information.

“The key is flexibility,” says Dr. Foreman. “Trimming core and adding electives allows students to tailor didactic courses to their area of interest. Every student will still get a good broad education in veterinary medicine but also enjoy the flexibility to focus.

“We want our graduates to be well-rounded and to have a basic grounding that will support career shifts later.”

Faculty are also strongly encouraged to demonstrate the clinical relevance of their subject matter, for example, by inviting a clinical faculty member to lecture in their pre-clinical course or by incorporating clinical case studies into the material.

One outcome of the past year’s intensive work on the curriculum, according to Dr. Foreman, is that pre-clinical and clinical faculty have gained a greater appreciation for and understanding of what the other does. Dr. Foreman anticipates that communication and rapport between students and faculty will also improve as students see that the curriculum is getting more practical.

We hope that Illinois practitioners will also appreciate the opportunity to engage with students and partner with the College through the new primary care rotation program. The entire faculty deserves our praise and thanks for their hard work in revising the curriculum. Special thanks go to the members of the Courses and Curriculum Committee, to committee chair Dr. Federico Zuckermann, and to Dr. Foreman.

I welcome your feedback on the curriculum changes. You can reach me at dean@cvm.uiuc.edu.

[sidebar]

How to Register Your Practice to Host Students

As a precursor to the required 4-week for-credit externships, the College has recently approved a new clinical rotation elective for fourth-year veterinary students. The Primary Care Elective Rotation allows students to spend 2 or 4 weeks at a private veterinary practice in order to increase their knowledge and skills pertaining to practice management, business practices, primary care, and preventive medicine.

Practitioners who are interested in mentoring a student in this way may register their practice on-line at www.VCRCIllinois.org. Follow the instructions from the “Post a Position” link.

Externship arrangements are the responsibility of the student and practitioner. Registering your practice allows veterinary students to choose your practice for a rotation but does not guarantee that you will be matched with a student. Likewise you have the option to decline to take a student.

To be eligible your practice must be a primary care practice or have a substantial primary care component. Small animal, mixed, or large animal practices are all eligible. Specialty practices are not eligible.

Students must be able to accomplish a majority of defined learning objectives at your practice. You must provide opportunities for the student to meet the learning objectives, and assure that the student is adequately supervised.

For more information, see the Department of Veterinary Clinical Medicine Web site: <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/vcm/>.