ROOKIE ROUNDS

What New Grads Are Afraid to Tell Practice Owners

Veterinary students are battling exhaustion, job-market rumors, and the fear of an uncertain future.

BY SUE VŨ

EXPERT COMMENTARY



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Dear Future Veterinary Clinic Owner,

I'm writing this sunk deep into the couch, the fatigue of 12 straight hours on rotation still working its way out of my knees. Physically, I'm sore from switching between standing and kneeling for exams all day. Mentally, my brain is so stuffed with clinical trivia I could probably win a bar quiz night, provided the theme is "endocrine emergencies in dogs and cats." Not a formal complaint, though. Here I am, four weeks before my NAVLE (North American Veterinary Licensing Examination), using what's left of my energy to write you this letter. I don't have anything to lose by being honest with you just yet. After all, I'm not employed.

The generation of vets you're about to hire is scared, and that fear is splitting us in two directions. Some of us are chasing everything we can get our hands on. Some of us — although a little ashamed of it — are choosing to take it slow.

Let's get the scary part out of the way first. You've seen the headlines: a national vet shortage, practices desperate to hire, no end to demand in sight. Yet from where we're standing, it looks different. Classmates trade rumors about how much harder it's gotten to land a job, and how last year's class didn't start getting hired until closer to graduation. Part of us hopes this isn't true, so we put it on the back burner and drive ourselves forward, either toward career security or sustainability. Despite pushing ourselves in two directions, both are ways of coping with the same fear: a future with no guarantees.

You see, some of us want more. Not just salary. We want more mentorship, more structured learning experiences. Some of us believe that if we do things under supervision long enough, we won't lose a patient when it's our turn to handle the appointments alone. More of my classmates than I expected are chasing rotating internships and residencies, trading a year or more of brutal hours and lower-than-average pay for a shot at specializing later, so they can eventually work the hours they want and make the money they want. Some chase surgery and the intricate game of tissue handling. Some want oncology, or internal medicine at a referral clinic equipped with every diagnostic tool imaginable. Some want the complexity and quick pace of an emergency floor. And some just want the internship because they're afraid of what skipping it might mean for their competency. I get it, because I used to be one of those people.

Last week, my classmates were discussing which clinics they wanted to match with for their rotating internships. When I realized I didn't have a convincing answer, something in my chest dropped. Emergency medicine used to be the goal. I wanted to be the vet who could juggle a respiratory-distressed bird, a seizing dog, and a blocked cat at the same time. It took four years of veterinary school, and four years of undergrad before that, to learn what I really want: to be a general practice veterinarian in the city where I already live. Knowing that it's less glamorous than what I used to want makes me feel a bit ashamed of myself, as if I've let down my past self. The younger version of me would have scoffed at how much I now prefer a full day of wellness exams over a triple emergency.

Some days, it still feels like I've given up on something. Like I'll botch my future by wanting an eight-hour day with a guaranteed lunch break, and just enough time left to call my family in Vietnam, eat a good meal, and get smothered by my cats before bed. But that's exactly the profession I want: one where I can still help people and their animals and have enough time left in each day for those who aren't my patients. Not one built on how much of myself I'm willing to burn to get there.

What scares me more than the current job market is being misunderstood. Not wanting an internship doesn't mean I don't want to learn. Wanting a stable schedule doesn't mean I've stopped caring about getting better. Wanting less isn't the same as wanting easy. Sure, a day full of routine kitten vaccines is a nice breather sometimes, but the complicated cases are still what make the day interesting. The year-old cat with sudden ascites, the foreign body surgery, the bird with unexplained feather loss — I still want to see them.

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I already knew the exhilaration of an ER floor with three hard cases running at once. What I'm starting to realize now is that not every meaningful day has to leave my heart racing and my mind numb. Satisfaction also comes from educating a first-time rabbit owner or truly listening to a client worried about her dog's itchy ears. I'm learning to value those moments, too.

So, if you're still hiring based on how ambitious and driven someone seems, you're taking a risk.

You hire the candidate who says yes to every emergency on her day off, who never asks a question that might slow her down. You assume her eagerness means she's ready, so you hand her more before she's found her footing. She might go far and become the specialist she always dreamed of. She might also spend the next several months so consumed with perfecting the medicine that, eventually, her passion burns out.

Your other candidate wants steady hours. She keeps her days off for the people who love her and the hobbies that recharge her. You might see that as less driven, not worth the extra effort of mentoring. What you might be missing is a doctor who already knows how to separate her worth from her production, which is what sustains people in this profession for decades.

If you take away anything from my letter, let it be this: The new grad asking for a slower life and the one chasing a residency are equally driven, just toward different definitions of stability. So, the next time you're interviewing one of us, skip the "where do you see yourself in five years?" question. Instead, ask what we're afraid of. Ask what gets us through the bad days. Then sit with us while we figure out how to answer those questions. That's how you'll find out who's going to stay.

Sincerely,
A Future DVM, Class of 2027 ■