

Dr. Mary Beth Leininger, First Woman President of the AVMA, Welcomes Ross Graduates into Veterinary Profession in Commencement Address

Commencement Address
Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine
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First Female President of the American Veterinary Medical Association

One of the perks that come with being the “invited speaker” is that I get to be the first to extend congratulations to the women and men who are joining my profession today. Welcome to the veterinary family!

And if you are here as the support network for these newly minted veterinarians (and the group of you who are still veterinarians-in-training): whether you are a spouse, parents, children, family or friends, you, too, deserve special recognition. These men and women have arrived at this day certainly because of your encouragement. But even more, during the past four years they depended on you for assistance, for inspiration, for sustenance, for support and (very likely) considerable financial help. Graduates, let’s acknowledge your special team!

It’s curious that we call today’s celebration both “graduation” and “commencement.” The word graduation conveys a feeling of finality, of something being done, of moving on. But commencement...that’s something different...it’s a launching, a start, a feeling of excitement for the future.

Today’s ceremony defines your future as one full of beginnings, not endings, a future full of adding more knowledge and skills to those you’ve worked hard for four years to acquire, a future full of your commitment to this profession called veterinary medicine.

Today’s ceremony might provide you with some of the last quiet moments you’ll experience for a while, so I’m going to ask you to join me in a little introspection.

I’d like you to consider two things:

1. What does it mean to be part of a profession?
2. Why is our profession, the veterinary profession, special beyond all others?

I’d been out of veterinary school for many years before I could actually put words to my understanding of what it meant to be a “professional.” What I finally realized is that it is comprised of four parts:

1. We come to veterinary medicine as a calling.
2. We are committed to learning lifelong.
3. We enjoy a feeling of community, of the collegiality that makes our professional culture.
4. We are bound by a sense of personal obligation – a code of ethics.

Most of us veterinarians recognize that our choice of this profession is a calling, something that’s in our blood, something we come to know instinctively.

In ancient cultures, the first professionals were the priests; those who made connections for their tribes with the cosmic forces and who possessed healing powers. Our calling to a life devoted to veterinary medicine has its roots in the calling that was experienced by the priests in those ancient cultures. Just like them, we are dedicated to healing and serving.

The career we’ve chosen is not just a job or a way to make a living. It’s a way of life.

The second characteristic of a profession relates to the skills that we master. Many occupations require technical adeptness, but the skills mastered by a professional flow from knowledge that is organized into a systematic body of theory...it's all those 'ologies that filled your days and nights for the past four years!

Understanding theory is so critical that most of our education is intellectual rather than technical. Not that it's unimportant to be able to hit a vein, or place a catheter, or repair a fracture but because the breadth of medical knowledge is exploding, our challenge is to understand and manage and convey information rather than simply possess hands-on skill.

I suspect that during your time here at Ross University a few of your professors might have quoted some truisms to you. One of the truest of those truisms is that five years from now, half of what you've learned will no longer be true. And the troublesome thing is that we don't know which half!

While you might fantasize that today marks the end of your schooling, it's really just the beginning. For a professional, learning is never complete.

The third distinction of a profession is a common culture that binds us together. This culture is made up of social values, norms of behavior, and symbols like our caduceus.

The most basic value of the veterinary profession is the worth which society places on our work. Although we treat animals, we are really serving humankind.

The late Dean Leo Bustad, a man of almost mythic stature in our profession, often spoke of our special need to be whole persons...persons of integrity, persons of an abiding reference for life, and persons with a singular responsibility to always act with compassion and humanness.

In a short time, you will be reciting and pledging the Veterinarian's Oath. I encourage you to listen carefully to the words you'll be speaking...they will define the rest of your life.

The final hallmark of a profession is a code of ethics, what I think of as a sense of service and responsibility to the community. A code of ethics is first and foremost a state of mind. Government regulation will not make you a professional, nor will the diploma that you will soon hold in your hands.

What will define you as a professional is believing in and acting by a code of ethics, because we professionals require ethics of ourselves. Our code demands that we be dedicated to excellence, compassionate to our patients, and honest and forthright in our dealings with people.

My new colleagues, what do you plan to bring to our profession?

—Will your career be dedicated to service?

—Will you be committed to learning lifelong?

—Will you build ties with other members of the veterinary community and advance our profession for those who will follow you?

—Will you have a feeling of personal obligation to the community you will serve and the animals you will care for?

—Will the veterinary profession, my profession, our profession, be better because you are a part of it?

Earlier I asked that you consider a second question: What sets veterinary medicine apart from the other healing professions? What makes it so special?

I found the answer to that question when I represented the AVMA more than 10 years ago at a conference in Geneva, Switzerland, entitled, "Animals, Health, and Quality of Life." Attending that meeting were human health professionals who were dedicated to helping people through and with animals. That conference opened my eyes to what we're really all about. We're not just the "animal doctors." Our profession provides a balance to life: The balance and connection that exists between human beings and the natural world that surrounds us.

Veterinary medicine is not simply the offspring of agriculture nor just the stepchild of human medicine. No, the veterinary connection with the creatures of our world stretches back into prehistory, when the very first visual record that people left of their place in time were the wonderful paintings found in the cave of southern France and Spain: paintings that depict not fellow human beings, but the animals that made up the world 35,000 years ago.

There is a beautiful book entitled, *Veterinary Medicine, an Illustrated History*. It traces the story of the interactions between people and animals from the ancient time thousands of years ago to the present. In every culture, in every society, animals and people have had a special connection. And in the ancient world, it was the animal healers who had the best and broadest understanding of health and disease.

Things are no different today. Ours is a significant profession with deep roots because the human–animal connection is a tightly woven seam bound by the centuries. The concept of “one medicine,” medical knowledge as a continuum regardless of the species being cared for, is truer today than at any other time in human existence.

I could cite page after page of the contributions that members of the veterinary profession have made to the health of our world. For example:

- Veterinary medicine is the profession that understands and protects each step in the animal food chain, making sure that the animal-based food that reaches the tables of the world is wholesome.
- Veterinary medicine is the profession that helps keep families healthy by preserving and celebrating the relationship between people and their pets.
- Veterinarians are the ones whose knowledge of zoonosis and epidemiology help prevent the spread of disease, whether the population at risk is human or animal.

Think of Dr. Tracey McNamara from the Bronx Zoo who solved the West Nile virus puzzle. And what about the work of veterinarians like Air Force General Dr. Richard Ford who are on the front lines of defending our nation from bioterrorism and Agri terrorism. And Dr. Max Essex who gave human medicine its earliest clues to understanding the AIDS virus. We even know a Nobel Laureate within our ranks: Dr. Peter Doherty, for his work in immunology at St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, TN.

And finally, we are the profession that treats and protects the animals that share our planet by speaking for their needs and seeing that they are handled humanely.

As we go through life, certain events are written indelibly in our memories. I bet you can picture the day just about four years ago when you received the letter telling of your acceptance to Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine.

Just like you, I, too, remember that day just as if it were yesterday, although it occurred in April 1963. I can remember the weight of the envelope. I can remember the way my heart pounded. I can remember holding my breath – wanting to open the letter, yet afraid to learn what was on the page. I knew that what I held in my hand would change my life. And it did.

My new colleagues, four years ago you, too, received a letter that changed your life. Four years ago you embarked on a journey in which today’s celebration is but one milepost. Four years ago you entered a door at this school and now you are departing to join generations of colleagues who hold a very special place in the history of humankind.

You know, because of changing conditions in our society, people today are often selecting life satisfaction in their careers over high salaries. Some of you here today have done just that. You’ve chosen to come to veterinary medicine as a second career, as a return to your first unfulfilled, undeniable love.

How lucky you are in the veterinary profession. For if the creation of new and important knowledge is a necessary tonic for the human spirit, and if service and the opportunity to make a difference provides a life worth living, then you and I are surely in the right profession.

About Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine

Ross University is a provider of medical and veterinary education, offering doctor of medicine and doctor of veterinary medicine degree programs. Founded in 1982 and located in St. Kitts, the School of Veterinary Medicine is affiliated with 21 AVMA-accredited U.S. veterinary schools where students complete their clinical year. The School of Medicine is located in Dominica, West Indies, with clinical education centers in Saginaw, MI, Miami, FL, and The Bahamas.

Ross University's administrative offices are located in North Brunswick, NJ. For more information about Ross University, visit www.RossU.edu or call 732.509.4600/877.ROSS.EDU.