

HOW TO CHOOSE A GOOD PRACTICE IN WHICH TO WORK OR LEARN

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Why new graduates end up in mediocre practices:

- Not enough depth of experience to judge quality – most students have only been inside a few practices in their life – the one the family took their pets to, the one or two they worked in during college, the veterinary school.
- 75% of people rate themselves above average – just because a practice says it's good doesn't mean it is, and you may not have the skill set to discover this until it's too late.
- Poor clinics may not even be successful enough to hire associates (though they may try to sell the practice to you later on). Most practices you interview at are average or mediocre. You need to be able to ferret out the good ones from amongst the mediocrity.
- Excellent practices do not get there by accident. You should find plenty of clues once you know where to look.
- Mediocrity: it takes a lot less time and most people won't notice the difference until it's too late.

Here are some basic things you need to understand before you head off for those interviews:

What did you come to veterinary school to learn? Surgery? Diagnosis? Medical procedures? What drugs to prescribe? Are these things all you need to learn or have to be successful in practice? Probably not. In fact, many times it's not the medicine itself that makes you happy or successful. more important are these four things:

- *Enjoyment
- *Caring/compassion
- *Communications skills
- *Drive to keep learning and changing

A good practice succeeds, not just because of the medicine, and certainly not because its doctors graduated first in their class, but because of these. Look for them in yourself and in the practices you visit.

It's difficult to quantify enjoyment or caring but you can see signs everywhere in how a practice interacts with clients and pets. Do clients get a warm welcome? Is there coffee available? Treats for the pets? Are the patients handled gently and calmly?

The rd item on the list is communication. Communication can be taught, practiced and improved. How important is communication to your success in practice?

- 20% of a person's success at any job is due to mastery of technical skills
- 80% is due to people skills – it's whether you can get along with your boss, your coworkers and of course your clients. Do you present yourself well? Can you discuss and solve a conflict or problem? Will you be a good teacher to the pet owners you see every day?

Communication – not that big a deal?

- How many patients will you save in your career via life-saving emergency surgery? Probably not that many, unless you get boarded in surgery.
- How many would you save via client education? A lot more! Example: Obesity
 - 44% of pets are overweight, yet the average veterinary school spends just 1.5 hrs of class time on weight management. (You probably spent more time learning about Rinderpest, which is a disease you will probably never see.)
 - Purina study shows 2 years longer life span for patients who are not obese. How much good can we do teaching clients how to manage their pets' weight issues? Via client education and obesity management you can prevent diabetes, arthritis, hepatic lipidosis, ACL tears and even cancer. ¾ of dogs evaluated for hip replacement surgery don't need that surgery if they lose weight. The way to save or improve the lives of your patients is in teaching their owners how to take care of their pets.
 - Dental Disease is another good example, and affects 80% of our patients
 - Average life expectancy is 10-20% longer with dental care
 - Dental disease hurts, so dental care relieves pain and suffering as well as prolonging life expectancy. What did we go to school to learn how to do if not this?

So, it's our job to explain to the client what the pet needs in order to be healthy and happy. We need to be good at it. Compliance, in other words whether the client follows our recommendations, is also greatly affected by good communication. 79% of clients in one study would comply if they felt the veterinarian was caring and compassionate. Only 47% complied if they did not get this feeling. Can you communicate caring and kindness as well as knowledge and professionalism?

If you don't enjoy explaining things to clients you won't enjoy your career in small animal medicine. The average person needs to hear about something at least 5 times to purchase it – which means you are going to explain the same things over and over and over again. Are you ready to teach?

- We have the opportunity to teach many people about pet care
- There are new advances every day
- Every client should be given the opportunity to learn
- Every pet should have an owner who knows how to take care of it for a long, healthy lifetime

Practicing medicine means being a teacher for most practitioners. If this isn't what you had in mind then look for a job position that doesn't require so much of it. Pathology, public health or research might be a better fit than private practice. Here are some reasons why:

- You have to start talking about long term care needs early – before the pet needs the dental or has already put on that extra 20 lbs. By the time the need is there, the client should have heard about the topic several times already.
- People remember less than 20% of what they hear – you not only need to explain it verbally, you need to send written materials home!
- You need to use language the client can understand and work hard to make presentations for needed care simple. It doesn't matter how many times you repeat it if they don't get it.

- Count on a good support staff to help you unless you want to do all 5 repetitions for every client yourself.

How to look, act and feel professional is important, too. You won't be a poor student anymore, you need to be a professional who clients can look up to.

- You are performing for an audience
- People will judge you on your appearance
- Will this practice help or hurt you if you need to polish your skills?

What do you need to learn - do you know what your weak points are? Will this practice be able to teach each of these things to you?

- Medicine
- Surgery
- Communication
- Customer service
- Professionalism
- Compassionate care

Now that you know that you need practice and mentoring for more than just the medical or surgical aspects of our profession, how do you find a good practice? How do you know if they can teach you these things? What questions should you ask?

Lesson 1: Choose good mentors

What do you ask to find out?

- Who considers you their mentor? What have you taught them?
- What do you think new veterinarians need to learn most?
- Why do you feel that way?
- How much time do you plan on devoting to mentoring me?

Who else should you ask? The team! Most applicants only ask questions of the doctor interviewing them, even when they are shadowing for a day. Nobody knows how things will go for you better than the veterinary team working there. You need to tap their expertise!

- Would you say the practice owner will be a good mentor? (Hint: if you get laughter or eye rolling, that's not a good sign.)
- Who else in the practice would make a good mentor for me?
- What could they teach me - what are their strengths?
- What does this practice do better than anyone else? (If you get a blank look that's not so good.)
- If you have areas you feel weak in, ask enough questions to know if this practice will help you to improve in those areas.

Lesson 2: Look for client education

- How long are your appointment times? If there is no time allotted for client education then it is probably not taking place. 15-20 minute appointment times don't allow for discussions about senior wellness screening, arthritis management or behavior problems. (What is the most common cause of death in young adult dogs? Euthanasia for behavior problems. Want to improve the lives of your patients? Then behavior needs to be discussed, especially with puppies and young dogs.)
 - Ask how long they schedule for an annual exam

- First puppy or kitten visit
- Sick pet
- What educational materials do you use with clients?
- What is the team's role in client education?

Can non-veterinary team members answer health care questions? Ask them a few, such as:

- What do you recommend clients do for their pets with chronic renal failure?
- What is the most common cause of death in young adult dogs?
- What are the health benefits of spaying & neutering? Does a spayed or neutered pet live longer?

Look around. Do they have...

- Handouts and brochures?
- Exam room videos or DVDs?
- A newsletter for clients?
- Up to date literature in the waiting area?
- PetCareTV or Pet Health Network touch screens or tablet computers with DVDs?
- A website? (Have you been to their website??)

Lesson 3: Team training

If you don't want to do 20,000 repetitions of the dental talk yourself...

What to ask about team training

- How often do you have team meetings?
- What do you do at team meetings?
- How do you train new employees?
- Do you do performance evaluations?
- How often would I be evaluated?
- What would I be evaluated on?
- Then ask team members the same things!! (If there are discrepancies follow up on them. Again, laughter or eye rolling are bad signs.)

Lesson 4: Next, how do you judge the medicine practiced? Look for protocols and consistency of care

- BP measurement
- Dental X-rays
- Meds monitoring
- Pain management protocols
- Wellness testing
- (Ask the team!)

Here are some good questions to ask that will give you an idea.

- What diseases would affect BP? When should it be measured? (2/3 of cats with CKD and hyperthyroidism are hypertensive. Hypotension is the most common side effect of anesthesia. If a practice is not measuring BPs they cannot possibly be above average.)
- What medications should be monitored and how should that be done? (Are they doing NSAID panels? Testing phenobarbital levels and chemistry panels annually for seizure patients? Looking for hypertension in dogs on phenylpropanolamine or low PCV in dogs on DES? Many hospitals still aren't doing these things.)

- How should RLs be diagnosed and treated? (What? They don't have a dental x-ray machine?)

Look at some medical records

- Are cases SOAPed?
- Is there a diagnosis?
- A treatment plan? What does the doctor want to do next if the patient does not improve?
- What pain meds were used for surgery? Was pre-anesthetic testing done?
- Could you pick up a case and treat the pet?
- Dental grades, BCS, pain scores, diet recommendations?

Do they keep up with new advances?

- 50% of our current medical knowledge will be obsolete in 5 years
 - To keep up you will need to turn over 10-15% of what you know every year
 - You will need to change your protocols, educate your staff and pass it on to the clients
 - This does not just mean you buy new equipment!

How can you tell?

- How much CE do you attend each year?
- Do you send associates to the same amount?
- How about support staff?
- What changes have you made in the past 1-2 years?
- What sorts of cases do you refer? (Be careful w/ this one! Veterinary schools will teach you to ask "Do you refer cases?" but it's meaningless unless you probe deeper or ask the question differently. When you word it that way it sounds really insulting to the doctor interviewing you if they are a good practice – of course I refer. It's a question that asks for a Yes or No answer, which isn't helpful to you. In addition, many older veterinarians graduated before the age of specialty care and are quite competent to pin a fracture or repair a diaphragmatic hernia. Some have special interests. Asking what specialists are near by and how the practice utilizes them is a much better approach.)

Lesson 5: Well managed practices are better places to work and learn

Philosophy and Culture – do they have any? Here are some of the codes I run my practice by:

- A client or patient should not receive a greater or lesser level of care simply because they saw one doctor and not another or spoke with one receptionist and not someone else. Everyone in the practice needs to be saying and doing the same things the same way.
- If a pet dies of a disease for which I had a preventative or treatment that I never told the owner about, that pet's death is my fault.
- Pets will not be in pain in my hospital.
- If we don't teach our clients about pet care, who will?

Can the leaders of the practice articulate these sorts of beliefs to you? What is the practice all about?

- What kind of leadership is there?
- Mission, vision, core values, goals?
- Do they measure practice statistics – compliance, production, inventory turnover rates? Good business practices?
- How often do they raise prices?
- Do they utilize NCVEI?

Who will you be working alongside?

- Do they have the right people on the bus?
 - Is it warm and friendly?
 - Ask about harmony or stress levels
- How many team members per DVM? 2 or 3:1 is not a good sign. It means you probably will be drawing blood, taking x-rays and discussing things over the phone that a technician should be able to do for you.
- Do the doctors or techs have specialties or interests? Are these encouraged? Will you learn good study and CE habits?

If the practice is not doing a great job with some of these items, will they let you make improvements?

- Is the owner open to new ideas?
- If you presented a case for purchasing a new piece of equipment or a new drug would you get a good reception?
- Does the team have permission to innovate?
- Will you feel empowered or powerless?
- (Ask the team!)

Lesson 6: You can't tell a book by its cover

- People lie. They want to make a good impression and usually they even have good intentions. But the way they talk or behave in front of you isn't necessarily how it is every day. Make sure you spend at least a day or two in the practice before accepting any position.
- New buildings and fancy equipment don't always mean good medicine
- Unused equipment is no use at all
- AAHA accreditation is a good indicator that this is a higher quality practice

Lesson 7: Look before you leap

- Have you thought about what you really want?
 - How much mentoring?
 - What equipment do you think is essential?
 - What are your minimum standards?
 - Point scoring is more accurate than gut feelings – be systematic. Use these outline questions and the answers you get to rate the practices you visit.
 - Do you have biases about what type of practice is best? Big, busy practices have more to see but may not always be the best fit. Small practices may seem cozier and safer but you may not get as much experience in some areas. Be sure you know what you want.

Lesson 8: The job of the associate is to make money for the practice

- You are there to help the practice grow and succeed by selling health care to pet owners.
- If you don't do that effectively we cannot afford to hire you.
- The good news is, the better job you do at it the longer your patients will live.

Lesson 9: Life is like a bell curve. There are only so many really good practices out there. It takes effort and time to find them.

- Whatever course you have chosen for yourself, it will not be a chore but an adventure if you bring to it a sense of striving – if your sights are set far above the merely secure & mediocre
 - David Sarnoff

Lesson 10: Enjoy

- Failures are few among people who have found a work they like enough to do it well. You invest money in your work; invest love in it too. Like your work. Like the people with whom you work. It pays well.
 - Clarence E. Flynn