

TOOLKIT: ACADEMIA

Examining Need, Capacity and Barriers to Accessing Food Animal Veterinary Services in Underserved Areas of Rural Ontario



1. Role and Responsibility

The issue of veterinary capacity in northern Ontario is multifaceted, and therefore the solution will require a variety of programs and strategies, facilitated by various stakeholders, at government, industry, and academic levels in order to be effective.

Students currently attending the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program are likely to become the next generation of veterinarians capable of filling these gaps in veterinary capacity. Academia has a unique responsibility in the issue of veterinary capacity as academic strategies can be used to motivate young graduates to seek work in rural and remote communities and encourage deeper learning on livestock health and production.

2. Research Results

Throughout the research, producers and farmer-led organizations expressed concerns that academia is not doing enough to promote large animal practice or the north and other rural areas of the province to students, creating a shortage of recently graduated veterinarians willing to work in specific geographic areas of need. This concern was also identified by students from the Ontario Veterinary College completing the Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine program. Through focus groups, current students expressed their concern that courses within the DVM program did not explore the realities of large animal veterinary care in rural areas, nor did field trips, or externships provide students with meaningful experiences or opportunities in northern Ontario.

During focus groups with University of Guelph students enrolled in the Ontario Veterinary College, participants discussed the social and economic barriers associated with living and practicing in northern and rural regions.

These barriers were considered significant factors in deciding the type of veterinary medicine that students were interested in practicing and the location. While few students that participated were from northern Ontario, those that were indicated a keen interest in returning to their home community to work. Generally, students who were from southern Ontario shared concerns regarding isolation, distance to family, and work-life balance as significant social barriers deterring them from working in the north.

Economically, students stressed the long travel distances and lower rate of pay when compared to small animal practice as being the most significant barriers. Students also discussed a general hesitance to work with large animals, noting limited exposure through their courses, which resulted in a lack of confidence when handling an animal. Students also noted the difficulty in working with farmers and a general sense that if you did not grow up on a farm that you would not be taken seriously by the client.

Combined, these challenges appear to dissuade students from pursuing either large animal practice or practicing in northern Ontario.

3. Recommendations

- 1 Review current student recruitment strategies, focusing on recruiting more students from northern and rural regions to the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program at the University of Guelph.
- 2 Assess the effectiveness of current large animal programming within the OVC's curriculum and increase the exposure to large animals and rural food animal operations earlier on in the program.

TOOLKIT: GOVERNMENT

Examining Need, Capacity and Barriers to Accessing Food Animal Veterinary Services in Underserved Areas of Rural Ontario



1. Role and Responsibility

The issue of veterinary capacity in northern Ontario is multifaceted, and therefore solutions will require a variety of programs and strategies, facilitated by various stakeholders, at government, industry, and academic levels in order to be effective.

The Canadian and Federal Governments are responsible for funding programs implemented in response to the need to support veterinary services in rural areas of Ontario. The Government has a key role in the issue of veterinary capacity as government regulated programs, such as the Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP), are essential veterinarians to practice in northern Ontario.

2. Research Results

The Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP), administered by the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines (MENDM) in partnership the Northern Producer Animal Health Network (NPAHN), and the Designated Area Veterinarians Association (DAVA), was identified by veterinarians as essential, with many suggesting that they would not be able to offer large animal veterinary services in northern Ontario without it.

Although the VAP is essential for veterinarians, many suggested that the program needed to be reviewed to reflect current costs to maintain and expand business sustainability incentives for veterinary medicine that promote full spectrum production management services.

Through interviews veterinarians suggested that the VAP increase the amount of funds designated to a single contract to \$60,000; this would mean an increase in the overall program budget to closer to \$2 million in order to accommodate 32 contracts. It was also suggested that the mileage rate that is offered needs to change.

It was identified by veterinarians that support from DAVA for student externships is a critical recruitment tool for veterinary clinics in the north. With no veterinary school in northern Ontario, veterinarians and veterinary clinics rely on students from southern Ontario willing to travel to the north and eventually fill gaps in service caused by retirements. Limited funding for student externships was highlighted as a barrier that discouraged students from training with large animals in northern Ontario. Although DAVA administers an additional \$800-\$1,000 for students who complete externships in northern Ontario, the reality of higher costs of living and limited accommodations in northern Ontario means that externships are a missed opportunity as monetary incentives are not sufficient.

Through focus groups, students from the Ontario Veterinary College expressed that significantly higher stipends, to cover cost of the living and accommodation, would help to encourage them to seek opportunities to practice veterinary medicine in the north.

The MENDM has indicated that the VAP is due for an upcoming review, and it is integral that groups such as DAVA and NPAHN be part of this review process.

3. Recommendations

- 1 Review northern-specific funding programs for veterinarians, such as the Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP), to assess its effectiveness in helping rural veterinarians and the producers they service.
- 2 Increase funding for students within the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program who are interested in completing externships in Northern Ontario, with a focus on large animal veterinary medicine

TOOLKIT: VETERINARIANS AND VETERINARY ORGS.



Examining Need, Capacity and Barriers to Accessing Food Animal Veterinary Services in Underserved Areas of Rural Ontario

1. Role and Responsibility

The issue of veterinary capacity in northern Ontario is multifaceted, and therefore solutions will require a variety of programs and strategies, facilitated by various stakeholders, at government, industry, and academic levels in order to be effective.

Veterinary organizations and veterinarians can offer a unique perspective on the issues impacting veterinary capacity and retention in northern and rural regions of Ontario. Those currently practicing in these underserved areas are well aware of the associated difficulties and offer valuable insights. With a shortage of veterinarians working in northern Ontario, it is crucial that veterinarians and veterinary organizations continue to develop innovative ways to facilitate veterinary medicine, particularly large animal practice, in rural and northern areas of Ontario in order to support a robust agricultural sector.

2. Research Results

Through interviews with veterinarians and veterinary organizations, it was noted that virtual consults and efficiency enhancing technologies would improve access, lower costs, and permit practices to offer a broader set of services in the north. Telemedicine was identified as an emerging technique for veterinarians with patients at a non-commuting distance.

It was suggested throughout the research and through prior studies that the use of Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVT) could be used to help alleviate some of the pressure from the limited number of veterinarians servicing northern Ontario. Veterinary organizations may benefit from increasing the use of RVTs in practice and broadening an RVT's scope of practice,

to provide effective, professional, and cost-effective healthcare to large animals.

Nearly all practicing veterinarians interviewed did not employ an RVT for large animal services. Though some had expressed interest, many suggested barriers/concerns regarding the costs of employing RVTs, time investment needed to train and educate them, limited scope of practice, potential risks associated with RVTs performing duties alone, and potential for clients to perceive the RVT as not adding as much value as the veterinarian. These sentiments have long been raised by certain subgroups of the veterinary profession, many of which represent perceived barriers and challenges that may not truly be present in practice. This is further evidenced by the successful integration of RVTs into clinical practice in numerous large animal clinics in southern Ontario and other areas. The missed opportunities and potential negative impacts of perception-based decisions are evident in this example.

A group led by the College of Veterinarians of Ontario is actively exploring different models that include some of the ideas discussed above to help with veterinary access in remote regions of the province.

3. Recommendations

- 1 The College of Veterinarians of Ontario should continue to work with their task force on the issue of veterinary retention and capacity in northern and rural areas of the province.
- 2 Opportunities should be explored to increase the use of Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVTs) to assist in supporting veterinarians in rural areas.

TOOLKIT: NORTHERN MUNICIPALITIES

Examining Need, Capacity and Barriers to Accessing Food Animal Veterinary Services in Underserved Areas of Rural Ontario



1. Role and Responsibility

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Northern municipalities hold an important responsibility in creating programs and strategies to help attract and retain veterinary professionals in their communities. These strategies can range from financial incentives (loan repayment assistance or stipends as incentives to practice in remote regions) to personal strategies (providing work opportunities for family members or providing accommodations).

2. Research Results

A jurisdictional scan was completed as part of the research for this project, which explored different attraction and retention strategies employed across Ontario, within Canada, and internationally, to assist with veterinary capacity in rural regions. At a municipal level, financial and personal strategies were demonstrated to have the highest success in attracting and retaining professionals to rural regions.

Through the jurisdictional scan and the interviews, it was identified that financial strategies were particularly successful in attracting veterinarians and other medical professionals to underserved areas. Region specific strategies could include student debt reduction/repayment programs, low-interest loans, and grant/scholarship programs that would incentivize graduates to seek out northern and rural practice areas. Funds to support veterinarians in offering more effective training

and continuing education for staff was viewed as useful for employee retention, while funds that could support veterinarians in these areas to recruit students (travel costs and accommodations to meet with and engage students, relocation fees, etc.) are impactful.

Personal strategies look at recruiting veterinary and medical professionals to rural regions by enticing them with unique social and environmental amenities. Given attraction and retention challenges, promoting work-life balance, family supports and social well-being were important strategies.

The research noted that a key factor in the reluctance of medical and health professionals in relocating to rural and remote regions is a result of real and perceived social and psychological barriers, including stress, isolation, limited facilities, and limited opportunities for partners and children. These concerns were echoed by veterinary students at the University of Guelph, with mentorship being an additional concern. The Rural Ontario Medical Program (ROMP) could be used as a model to overcome these barriers for veterinary students. Their program identifies preceptors who act as mentors for medical students placed into rural communities. The mentors provide students and young professionals with information about the community they will be working in and help to find lodging for students, thus reducing the stressors noted above.

3. Recommendations

- 1 Explore municipally guided attraction and retention strategies for new veterinarians.
- 2 Create strategies and programs to improve the attraction and retention of new immigrants to northern communities.