On the right track?

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On the right track?
Specialisation in veterinary education and practice
Andrew Gardiner

‘Not only is the organisation of veterinary specialisation confusing and opaque, but the profession’s concept of specialisation is inward-looking and oriented towards fellow professionals rather than aimed at informing the customer. The customer is not even given the reassurance that someone who claims a specialism is professionally sanctioned to do so’.

**SPECIALISATION IN PRACTICE**

*Who counts as an eye specialist? You choose!*

- ‘Mr A in our practice, who does most of our small animal work…’
- ‘Ms B in our practice, who has a special interest in eyes…’
- ‘Ms C in our practice, who has the RCVS Ophthalmology Certificate…’
- ‘Mr D, who has the RCVS Ophthalmology Certificate and has an excellent reputation for taking local referrals…’
- ‘Ms E, who has a European Diploma in Ophthalmology and works at a multi-disciplinary referral centre…’
- ‘Dr F, who has an RCVS Diploma in Ophthalmology, a PhD and works as an academic clinician…’

**How veterinary specialisation has developed**

**The medical model – ‘formal’ specialism**
- Specialist training involves exams and memberships
- Disciplines created by developing new clinical areas or removing them from remit of general practice
- Expertise is divided and formal referral structures developed
- GPs (as in Medicine) may be prevented from treating certain conditions or accessing certain drugs (not currently enforced in veterinary medicine)
- Produces a ‘top-down approach’ which gives clinical specialists an elite status within the profession and education
- Has been prominent in small animal medicine & surgery

**The practice model – ‘experiential’ specialism**
- Arises within general practice as ‘veterinary societies’ (see above)
- Often mediated by species-based interest groups operating outwith academia
- Focuses on experiential learning and informal structures/networks of expertise, which are based on peer recognition, not necessarily qualifications
- Historically, the veterinary profession has resisted formal division of expertise
- Has been prominent in farm animal practice

**Some educational issues**

- Does the medical model of specialisation fit veterinary medicine?
- Who enforces specialisation, where, and how?
- Can a small profession sustain a high degree of specialisation?
- Should specialisation in the form of ‘tracking’ be introduced into undergraduate training?
- We cannot consider postgraduate specialisation without also considering undergraduate ‘specialisation’

**Reference**

Gardiner, A., Lowe, P. & Armstrong, J. ‘Who or what is a veterinary specialist?’ *Veterinary Record* 2011; 169: 354-356