Position Statement on the Utilization of Paraprofessionals in Farm Animal Veterinary Medicine

September 14, 2010

Proposal
The Colorado Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) has received a proposal recommending that the Colorado Veterinary Practice Act (CVPA) be modified to allow veterinary practices engaged in the delivery of food animal veterinary medicine to employ Certified Food Animal Veterinary Assistants. These certified assistants would be empowered to deliver livestock healthcare and diagnostic services as approved by, and under the direction of, a licensed and accredited veterinary practitioner. The assistant could perform these services distant from the direct physical oversight of the veterinarian, which diverges from what is currently stipulated in the CVPA.

Response
The paraprofessional category has been suggested as the way to address the veterinary workforce shortage in farm animal veterinary medicine. Certainly, there is a shortage of food systems veterinarians who work in food safety and inspection, public health, academia, basic research, and industry. However, attracting farm animal veterinarians to meet the demand for rural veterinary practice in Colorado is complicated by a number of overarching trends including the lack of economic viability for farm animal practitioners created by vertical integration of livestock production, larger and fewer producer operations, genetic selection, improved management and nutrition, disease prevention, and the underlying financial weakness of the beef cow sector.

Further, the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA) reported in the April 15, 2010 edition that retaining farm animal practitioners is also an issue; the reasons cited for leaving farm animal practice were, in order, emergency duty, lack of time off, salary, practice atmosphere, and family concerns.

The suggestion that an animal scientist with a Bachelor of Science Degree could perform all of the procedures outlined in the proposal is an unnecessary and alarming expansion of the CVPA. Certainly an animal scientist can perform some of these procedures. However, the notion that an animal scientist could perform all procedures with the same skill and competence as a veterinarian is unrealistic. Further, most producers want a veterinarian who can perform all of these procedures and who can do so at the speed of commerce.

It is unlikely that confined animal feeding operations, which already train their own employees to perform some of the procedures described in the proposal, would pay more for these procedures to be done by a paraprofessional and schedule work around the paraprofessional. Section 12.64.104.1f of the CVPA clearly allows employees of the animal owner to perform these procedures. CVMA does not object to this practice.
The State of Colorado relies on veterinarians to be the first line of defense in disease outbreaks, to administer disease control programs, and to monitor the state’s livestock resources for the appearance of foreign animal disease. The State of Colorado benefits from the relationships veterinarians build with the livestock community and relies on local veterinarians to be able to communicate to livestock producers the need for disease control programs. Veterinarians must be accredited with the USDA to perform these functions and only veterinarians can be accredited.

The human health model has a substantial network of state, county, and municipal public health departments that do not exist in veterinary medicine. In the animal health model, local, private-practice veterinarians fulfill the public health role.

While there are economic implications to this issue, the implications might not be what one imagines. Rural veterinary practice has always been small, made up of one to several veterinarians. This business structure has served rural communities well. The paraprofessional model would allow a veterinarian or a corporation located remotely from a community to place a paraprofessional in the community to provide service, perhaps on a part-time basis; the client might only see the veterinarian once a year to establish a veterinary-client-patient relationship (VCPR). This model already exists in the veterinary prescription drug business. Farm animal veterinarians have been unable to compete in this model and wouldn’t be able to compete against a paraprofessional as described in the proposal. Further, a paraprofessional may only be able to perform a limited number of services – in sharp contrast to the community’s expectation that the veterinarian offer a complete menu of services.

Ultimately, this is an animal welfare issue. An animal scientist is not a veterinarian. The veterinarian has a responsibility that goes beyond productivity, efficiency, and economics. The veterinarian must be aware of species-specific behavior. The veterinarian is the only professional that takes account of the social contract between humans and animals that has developed over the last 10,000 years of animal domestication. As society becomes more detached from farm animals, the veterinarian’s role becomes even more important. The notion that the animal scientist could fulfill the role of a veterinarian is contrary to the veterinary profession’s history, culture, and education.

**Conclusion**
CVMA does not support the concept of paraprofessional utilization as described in the proposal. CVMA is in favor of other programs and ideas that strengthen farm animal practice. These include educational debt relief, continuation of Colorado State University’s program to select a number of students for farm animal careers, different business models for farm animal practice (such as the New Zealand club system), greater use of certified veterinary technicians, improved practice management that increases retention, and funding from USDA Rural Development grants. Supplanting the veterinarian from veterinary medicine undermines the health and welfare of animals, diminishes the capacity for disease surveillance, and violates the social and ethical contract between the veterinarian and society.