The veterinary technician profession is growing at a rapid rate; it is expected to grow 30% by 2022, which is faster than average. Despite this growth, there is a high turnover rate in the profession. According to a NAVTA survey completed in 2012, one area of concern for a majority of veterinary technicians was a lack of professional recognition, which is troubling, and a potential cause for the high turnover rate in the profession. With multiple title designations that vary from state to state, there is confusion in the public about who veterinary technicians are, and what their purpose is in the veterinary community. In the past, there has been discussion of having a nationally standardized title which would help clear this confusion. There has also been an attempt to change the title from veterinary technician to veterinary nurse at the state level in Pennsylvania, however nurses showed up at the veterinary board hearing stating that they opposed the veterinary nurse title.

Because of these concerns, a study was performed with the intent to discover the opinions and knowledge that human nurses have of credentialed veterinary technicians. This applied mixed methods research study aimed to investigate the opinions of nurses on a proposed title change: if they were opposed to a proposed title of Registered Veterinary Nurse (RVN), and if so, what were the reasons for the opposition. The study also aimed to assess the level of knowledge that nurses had pertaining to the education level, credentialing process that is required for veterinary technicians, and the job duties that veterinary technicians primarily perform in the veterinary practice setting. A survey was developed by the researcher and reviewed by colleagues to determine validity through inter-rater reliability. This survey was then distributed online through the social media website Facebook, inviting registered nurses and licensed practical nurses to participate.

Three nursing group administrators were contacted on Facebook asking for
permission to distribute the survey to their group members. One group administrator gave permission for the survey to be distributed, while the other two administrators declined. Informed consent was obtained from the nursing group administrator and the survey was posted within the group twice during the 2 week data collection period. The survey was also posted in a personal Facebook account asking social media users to share it with those who fit the sample population.

There were 93 respondents that accepted the informed consent and proceeded to the survey. Twenty-eight participants exited the survey prior to completing the survey and those surveys were considered incomplete; those that had skipped questions were included in the data set due to the limited number of responses. The most commonly skipped questions were two qualitative questions requiring written responses. Of the remaining participants, 62 participants were determined to be eligible. Three participants were determined to be ineligible since they were not a registered or licensed practical nurse. Due to the nature of social media, it is unknown how many participants saw the posted link for the survey and declined to participate. It is assumed that the lack of responses might be indicative of a lack of caring of nurses on veterinary related topics. Of the 14 respondents who fit the criteria for the survey and exited the survey prior to the last page, 50% exited on page 3 which was the first question that asked about veterinary technicians; the question being if they opposed the proposed RVN title.

Forty-one respondents (66.13%) identified that they do not have an objection to a potential title change from credentialed veterinary technician to registered veterinary nurse (RVN), 5 respondents (8.06%) objected to the registered veterinary nurse title, while 16 (25.81%) reported that they did not have an opinion on the subject.

Although the highest percentage of respondents chose the correct answer of associates degree with 40.35%, the majority of respondents (59.57%) chose an incorrect answer regarding the educational requirement of veterinary technicians. This may be indicative that nurses do not understand the educational requirements of veterinary technicians. This data supports the hypotheses that a considerable portion of human nurses are not aware of the educational requirements of veterinary technicians.

Respondents were given a list of 19 job duties and then asked which job duties they thought veterinary technicians primarily performed in the veterinary setting. The researcher chose 13 duties to be ones that veterinary technicians primarily perform, 4 that veterinary assistants primarily perform, and 2 that are performed by a veterinarian. Roughly half of the respondents (49.09%) were able to identify at least 10 duties that veterinary technicians perform. Considering that the top reason respondents provided for not objecting to the title change was similarities of job duties between nurses and veterinary technicians, an inference can be made that this may not reflect the knowledge of duties specific to veterinary technicians, but rather that nurses made their selections based on human nursing job duties.
The number of respondents who answered that technicians must take a qualifying exam was 38 (61.29%). Of those respondents who objected to a title change, 4 out of the 5 respondents answered that they were not sure if a qualifying exam was required, while the fifth one answered yes, technicians are required to take a qualifying exam. Of the respondents who answered they do not object to a title change, 73.17% answered that technicians must take a qualifying exam, while 26.83% answered they were not sure. When compared to nurses who did not have an opinion or objected to a proposed title change, the nurses who had no objection were the only group surveyed who had the majority of respondents identify a qualifying exam as a veterinary technician requirement. One respondent answered qualitatively that technicians do not have to take the NCLEX-RN so therefore did not deserve a nurse title. This would indicate that the nursing community might not realize that there is a veterinary qualification test (VTNE) similar to the NCLEX-RN that technicians must take prior to working as a credentialed veterinary technician. In comparing this data, it could be concluded that nurses, who oppose the title of Registered Veterinary Nurse, lack knowledge about the VTNE qualifying exam that veterinary technicians must pass in order to be credentialed.

The percentage of nurses who object to a title change was small (8.06%). When compared with the previous data regarding nurses’ knowledge of a qualifying exam for veterinary technicians, it could be concluded that nurses who are informed of the requirement of a qualifying exam are less likely to object to a veterinary nurse title. It could also be concluded that the objections that were presented at the board meeting in Pennsylvania might not be representative of the nursing profession as a whole.

The percentage of nurses who objected to a proposed title change was 7.14% (n=2), while 71.42% identified that veterinary technicians are required to take a qualifying exam, and 50% identified an associates degree as the educational requirement of veterinary technicians. When compared to the 54.09% of nurses who did not belong to neither a state or national association, the percentage of respondents who object to a proposed title change was 9.09%, while 51.52% responded that veterinary technicians are required to take a qualifying exam, and 30% were able to correctly identify an associates degree as the educational requirement of veterinary technicians. From this data, it can be inferred that nurses who belong to either a state and/or national nursing association may be more knowledgeable about veterinary technicians and less likely to object to a potential title change.

Fifty-one respondents answered that they have pets. The percentage of nurses who object to a proposed title change and responded that they have pets was 7.84%, while those who do not have pets and objected was 9.09%. The percentage of nurses who object to a title change was small (8.06%). When compared with the previous data regarding nurses’ knowledge of a qualifying exam for veterinary technicians, it could be concluded that nurses who are informed of the requirement of a qualifying exam are less likely to object to a veterinary nurse title. It could also be concluded that the objections that were presented at the board meeting in Pennsylvania might not be representative of the nursing profession as a whole.

The researcher hypothesized that nurses would not be able to identify the educational requirements of veterinary technicians (H1a), would not be aware of the credentialing process of veterinary technicians (H3a), and would not be aware of job duties and responsibilities of veterinary technicians (H2a).
nurses who identified that veterinary technicians are required to take a qualifying exam and have pets was 66.67%. The percentage of nurses who do not have pets and were able to identify a qualifying exam as a requirement of veterinary technicians was 36.36%. Of the nurses that identified that they have pets, 41.3% identified an associates degree as the educational requirement of veterinary technicians while 36.36% of nurses who do not have pets responded similarly. Based on this data, it can be inferred that nurses who have pets are more likely to be knowledgeable than those who do not have pets. One possible cause is that nurses who have pets may have an increase in exposure to veterinary technicians when obtaining medical care for their pets.

Approximately 71% answered that there was not a difference or that they were not sure if there was a difference between veterinary technicians and veterinary assistants. In addition, over half of the respondents could not identify an associate degree as a requirement for veterinary technicians or identify at least 10 job duties that veterinary technicians perform. While the majority of nurses answered that veterinary technicians must take a qualifying exam in order to be credentialed, only 1 of the 5 respondents who objected a veterinary nurse title answered that a qualifying exam is required. That respondent provided qualitative answers which contradict the answer of an opposition to an RVN title. Since one of the reasons for a RVN title opposition included that veterinary technicians do not have to take a qualifying exam like the NCLEX-RN, this is indicative that more awareness is needed about the requirements of the credentialing process of veterinary technicians.

The top two themes identified based on respondents who objected to a title change were that the education is subpar to nurses, and the title is not deserved by veterinary technicians. The top two themes identified of those respondents who did not object to a title change were that the job duties of both professions are similar, and that veterinary technicians deserve recognition for their achievements. An additional reason that was given by participants for their opposition to a RVN title included that a NCLEX-RN board exam is not required for veterinary technicians. Sixty percent of participants who oppose a RVN title answered that a vocational certificate was the highest education level a veterinary technician is required to obtain. The data showed that only 30% of respondents were able to identify both an associates degree and qualifying exam as requirements of credentialing.

Seven hypotheses were set forth for this study, as denoted by H1a, H2a, H3a, etc. The researcher hypothesized that nurses would not be able to identify the educational requirements of veterinary technicians (H1a), would not be aware of the credentialing process of veterinary technicians (H3a), and would not be aware of job duties and responsibilities of veterinary technicians (H2a). H1a and H2a were supported based on the data since 40.35% of respondents identified educational requirements and 49.09% of respondents identified at least 10 job duties of veterinary technicians. The researcher rejected H3a since the majority of nurses (67.74%) were able to identify at least one component of the credentialing process. Although the percentage of nurses who were able to identify at least one component of the credentialing process is higher than the percentage set by the hypotheses, only 19 respondents (30.64%) were able to identify both components of the credentialing process. This raised a flag that nurses might understand some aspects of what is required to become a veterinary technician, but they might not fully grasp the requirements that are required. The requirements to become a credentialed veterinary technician are very similar to that of a registered nurse, so the results could be skewed based upon the nurses’ knowledge of their own profession as opposed to an understanding of the duties and credentialing of veterinary technicians. A registered nurse must have at least an associates degree and then pass the NCLEX-RN, while a credentialed veterinary technician must have at least an associates degree and pass the VTNE.

It was hypothesized (H4a) that >65% of nurses would not oppose a veterinary nurse title, this hypotheses, as it relates to the data was supported, with the majority of nurses (66.13%) not opposed to a veterinary nurse title. Furthermore, 25.81% did not have an opinion on the topic which leads the researcher to believe that there might not be as much resistance to a proposed title change as the limited review of the literature suggested. It is unknown how many nurses in Philadelphia were present at the veterinary board hearing discussing a change of nomenclature and therefore, the resistance to the change might be nominal compared to the entire nursing profession. H5a, H6a, and H7a expanded on H4a in that it was hypothesized that, of the respondents who opposed a veterinary nurse title, less than 50% would identify the educational requirements required of veterinary technicians (H5a), the credentialing process (H6a), or at least 10 job duties that veterinary technicians perform in the veterinary setting (H7a). H5a and H7a were supported by the data, though H6a was rejected since 60% of the respondents identified at least one component of the credentialing process. However, none of the respondents who objected to registered nurse title were able to
identify both a qualifying exam and an associate’s degree as requirements of the credentialing process. This signaled to the researcher that those who objected might base their objections on not having enough knowledge about the requirements required to be a credentialed veterinary technician.

Summary and Conclusions

The data analysis for this convergent parallel mixed methods study answered the 5 research questions and 7 hypotheses set forth for the study. The data analysis revealed that 66.13% of respondents do not oppose a proposed title change, while 8.06% do oppose a title change. Although the majority of respondents do not oppose the title or do not have an opinion on the matter, results show a lack of knowledge regarding the education, credentialing, and job duties of veterinary technicians, regardless of their opinions of a RVN title.

Although the sample size is small and cannot be generalized to the whole population of nurses, the research questions and hypotheses led the researcher to believe there is a need for awareness and education of the nursing community in the requirements of credentialed veterinary technicians. Hopefully, this awareness will prevent roadblocks to having a title change from veterinary technician to veterinary nurse as the two professions have similar requirements and job duties.

The National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) recently announced that they have initiated the process of having a nationally standardized title of Registered Veterinary Nurse. This announcement supports the importance of this study, as more information about the potential hurdles facing this movement will be necessary to achieving the goal of including the term ‘nurse’ in the veterinary professional title. By having more insight into the opinions of nurses and how knowledgeable they are about veterinary technicians, there is potential to help the veterinary technician profession move forward with a Registered Veterinary Nurse title. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will help open communication between the two healthcare professions, as the nurses that participated in the study have been exposed to the proposed title change.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate nurses’ opinions of veterinary technicians utilizing the term ‘nurse’ in the veterinary technician title. The study also intended to investigate the level of knowledge that nurses had on the education and credentialing requirements of veterinary technicians as well as their knowledge of the job duties performed by veterinary technicians. The study found that the majority of nurses do not oppose a Registered Veterinary Nurse title; however, there were significant gaps in knowledge of veterinary technician education and job duties.

Due to the small sample size, and limited time frame, it is recommended that another survey on a larger scale be performed. Having a longer data collection period may help with the low response rate. By involving nursing associations or contacting nursing professionals directly instead of through social media, it may be possible to obtain a higher response rate. The researcher believes that one limitation of the current study is that social media is generally a platform for entertainment and social interaction between friends. Potential participants might not want to use their time on social media taking a survey.

It is also recommended that the veterinary technician profession raise awareness in the general public of the differences between veterinary professionals, such as veterinary assistants and veterinary technicians, and what is required for veterinary technicians to become credentialed. Additionally, awareness needs to be raised in the veterinary technician profession as well. During the researcher’s initial investigation into this topic, the researcher performed a straw poll of veterinary technicians during the 2015 North American Veterinary Conference. The straw poll suggested that there was confusion about the 3 different title designations and what the requirements were for each of those titles. Currently, there are 13 states that still do not require veterinary technicians to be credentialed. It is recommended that prior to a nationally standardized title of Registered Veterinary Nurse being initiated, more effort should be made to require standardized credentialing across the nation. Without national credentialing, human nurses have a higher standpoint to resist allowing the term ‘nurse’ to become unprotected. They would not be assured that all persons who will be utilizing the term ‘nurse’ in their title have fulfilled the requirements necessary.

In the United Kingdom, the term “registered nurse” is still a protected title, which can only be used by the human nursing profession. However, the title ‘nurse’ is not protected, which paved the way for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to have the title of Registered Animal Nursing Auxiliaries be changed to Registered Veterinary Nurses. A big concern in the human nursing profession is that practices will refer to medical assistants as nurses. This is similar to veterinary assistants being referred to as technicians in the veterinary industry. By having the title of “registered nurse” protected, it could show the nursing profession that they will still be protected from those trying to use a nurse title illegally.

The compromise of having the title “registered nurse” protected for the human nursing profession while allowing the term ‘nurse’ to be used in a veterinary title is one pathway that could be pursued by the veterinary technician profession in order to appease the nursing profession. In addition, the researcher recommends that the veterinary profession seek to have the title of “registered veterinary nurse” protected to prevent those who have not fulfilled all qualifications required of the title from using it indiscriminately.
REFERENCES


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