

Veterinary technicians: Opportunities, but at what cost?

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Like many veterinary technicians, Jennifer Deeks grew up dreaming of becoming a veterinarian but chose the less time-consuming – and expensive – educational path to a career in animal health.

Since graduating with a two-year degree in veterinary technology, Deeks has enjoyed a varied and relatively lucrative career, first as a research technician for a pharmaceutical company, then at the University of Toronto and finally at a small-animal practice.

Still, she couldn't cover her living expenses, so she took a job managing the dental office at a university veterinary school for \$22 per hour, and added a 12-hour shift every week as a veterinary technician in an emergency animal hospital where she earns \$16 per hour.

"I would love to do the emergency work full-time, but the pay differential makes it not worth it," explained Deeks, who lives and works in Guelph, Ontario. "We have a mortgage and bills."

Shelley Harpster, a licensed veterinary technician with 20 years of experience, works at a zoo in Sioux Falls, S.D., for \$13 per hour.

She loves the job in part because of the challenges of figuring out new ways of getting animals to take their medications both for prevention of disease and treatment of illnesses.

"Apparently, I'm just a sucker, because I enjoy what I am doing, and I can't imagine doing anything else," she said. "If I didn't have my husband to supplement my income, I couldn't do it."

Deeks and Harpster are like many veterinary technicians — the vast majority of whom are female — who battle it out every day to make ends meet doing the job they love.

Although in some areas there are plenty of positions and opportunities for professional growth, veterinary technicians complain of a pervasive disconnect between their skills and their potential earnings. They maintain that many veterinary employers offer salaries not much better than minimum wage and don't always appreciate or support their technicians' professional know-how and contributions.

Stephen Bruhn Cital, a veterinary technician at the California National Primate Research Center at the University of California, Davis, notes that a veterinary technician's education is as substantial as that of a nurse, and the job typically requires a broader range of skills, and yet the average pay is a fraction of what a nurse earns.

“I know technicians who are making \$9 an hour, and they are placing IV catheters, monitoring anesthesia – all the same things that any human nurse does,” he said.

Organized veterinary medicine representatives stress that they work on many levels to build and support the profession.

“Like any small business, compensation and utilization can vary from practice to practice and region to region,” said Dr. Karen Brandt, assistant director in the Education and Research Division of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), in an e-mailed response to questions. “But it is our belief that veterinarians consider veterinary technicians as an integral part of the practice team and treat them as such.”

Credentialed techs vs. unlicensed assistants

Some technicians argue, however, that some veterinarians erode the professional pipeline by hiring less-expensive, unlicensed assistants to do the work that credentialed technicians have spent time and money being trained to do.

An [article](#) in Trends Today, a publication of the American Animal Hospital Association, supports the contention. It reports: “Despite high turnover rates and a widely acknowledged dearth of certified technicians, few veterinarians are willing to ante up for highly qualified professionals on a short- or long-term basis, say some industry professionals.”

That problem is exacerbated by the fact that some states do not require veterinary technicians to be licensed, explained Amy Campbell, a veterinary technician and supervisor for an animal hospital in Massachusetts, where licenses are not required.

“If you work for ‘Dr. Smith’s Animal Hospital,’ and there is no requirement that you are licensed in order to do your job, then there is no motivation for someone to make the investment,” she said. “The problem is that credentialed technicians are making the same or less than people who they work with who have not attended an AVMA-accredited veterinary technology program. I don’t think there is real value attached to the education.”

Added Deeks: “I really wish we were more valued for the hands-on work we do. It seems like we are a dime a dozen. If I step out of a job, there are 10 others who are happy to do it for the same pay or less. We are so accustomed to poor pay that we don’t fight for more.”

Dr. Katie Linderman, owner of Standifer Gap Pet Hospital in Chattanooga, Tenn., is sympathetic to technicians’ concerns. She values her staff highly and cares about them like family. But their pay does not reflect that high regard.

“I love my employees ... (but) I’m probably not nearly as good to my staff as I should be,” Linderman said. “I certainly don’t pay them what they deserve to be paid.”

Her staff’s wages range from \$8.50 an hour to about \$13 an hour. None is credentialed. Linderman said she cannot afford to pay what a credentialed technician would demand.

She opened the clinic six years ago, not long before the economy crashed. Linderman said her own pay, calculated by the hour, amounts to even less than what she pays staff. “We’re all underpaid,” she said.

Her hope is that her employees feel compensated — as she does — by satisfaction in their work. And for what they may lack in formal education in animal health, Linderman tries to make up by sharing textbooks with them, providing reading material and quizzes on the material and teaching skills such as medical record-keeping. In short, she encourages and supports her employees’ interest in medicine.

One employee of note is, at age 19, finishing a nursing degree with the aim of working as a nurse to support herself through medical school. “She wants to become a physician,” Linderman said. “I tried to talk her into veterinary medicine but she’s too smart. She said, ‘You guys don’t make any money. I think I’ll stick with something more profitable.’”

Not every clinic owner treats his or her support staff with esteem. When Laura Perry of Alabama started in the veterinary technology field, she was shocked to find practice owners discouraging her from asking questions about patient diagnoses and treatments “in an environment where I was treated like a moron,” she said.

Things improved, she said, after she joined a specialty referral hospital in Decatur where she felt more valued and had more opportunity for job growth. But when she weighed her options, she decided to go back to graduate school for more training in computer science.

“Although I don’t really look forward to going back to a desk job, I do look forward to being paid a living wage with benefits and being treated like an educated professional,” Perry said. “As long as the majority of vets just want techs to act as ‘critter holders’ I don’t see the vet tech profession ever gaining any respect.”

Andrea Ball, executive director of the professional group National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA), understands the frustrations. She stresses that veterinary technicians need to advocate for themselves and educate their employers on the value they provide.

Ball cited an AVMA [study](#) that found that in 2007, for each additional credentialed veterinary technician per veterinarian in the practice, gross revenues increased by more than \$93,000. (Revenues were not significantly affected by the number of uncredentialed technicians per veterinarian.)

In addition to performing lab work, case evaluation and other such tasks, properly trained technicians can help to educate the client and sell products, she said.

“I call them the soft skills – sales and marketing, communication,” Ball said. “We work very hard to educate our members on professional development skills, the details that make you

invaluable to your team. In many cases they have to teach their vets how they need to be utilized.”

For Dr. JoLynne Grant, years of observing the work styles of credentialed technicians versus support staff with no formal training has taught her the value of those specifically educated for the job.

“The ones I train in-house, they do things because I tell them to do things, but I expect my technicians who have trained in a program to understand the ‘why’ of it and be proactive in how things are done,” said Grant, who has been in practice for 18 years and owns Great Lakes Pet Emergencies in Saginaw, Mich.

Of 10 support staff at the hospital, Grant said two are licensed technicians. Most of the rest have bachelor’s degrees in fields such as biology or medical technology.

To her mind, the ideal support staff would be composed entirely of credentialed technicians — even those serving as receptionists, given their heavy client contact.

Why, then, doesn’t she hire all licensed technicians? In Grant’s case, money is not the issue (although she noted that assistant pay starts at \$8 to \$9 an hour, compared with \$15 an hour for licensed personnel). The hitch is supply. She said there simply are not enough licensed veterinary technicians in her region, and those in other areas seem disinclined to move for the work.

Grant suspects many formally educated technicians in low-paying jobs with employers who don’t value their training are tied to the jobs perhaps because they want to stay in a given city for family or relationship reasons.

Grant estimates that owners of half the practices in the country understand the value of formally trained technicians. She urged those technicians who wish to be valued to diligently seek them.

“When they come out (of school), I’d like to see them do some research, rather than immediately take a job in their hometown,” she advised. “They should ... find people who appreciate their techs for what they’re trained to do. Then they’ll be able to command a higher salary.”

Ball of NAVTA noted that the field is evolving, and veterinary technicians will need patience and perseverance as it does.

“We all have to pay our dues at some point,” she said. “If a technician is willing to come in at \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year, in many cases he or she will have many opportunities to grow their career, whether in clinical work, specialty work, hands-on laboratory work, research or sales and marketing for pharmaceutical companies.”

Field growing; so is educational debt

By all accounts, veterinary technology is a burgeoning field. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2009 reported that jobs for veterinary assistants and technicians were projected to grow by 36 percent by 2018.

Another Trends Today article, headlined “[For technicians, a rosy outlook](#),” declares, “With pet ownership on the rise, positions in the veterinary industry are firmly housed in the growth sector.”

A NAVTA survey in 2008 found that average salaries for its members had steadily increased as well, from \$19,000 annually in 1991 to more than \$36,000 in 2007. The survey also showed that employment benefits across the board had improved.

Still, the survey found that pay was the number-one concern: Nearly 79 percent surveyed felt that veterinary technicians were so underpaid that the feasibility of staying in the profession was declining. Only 43 percent reported being satisfied and definitely planned to stay in the profession.

The disappointment with potential salaries is compounded for some by high college debt. Although two-year veterinary technician programs are offered at many inexpensive community colleges, the private veterinary technician programs are costly — as much as \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year for a two-year program (applied associate's degree or associate's degree); and more for a four-year bachelor's degree, according to Nanette Walker Smith, a credentialed veterinary technician with the [Veterinary Support Personnel Network](#).

“They graduate with huge loans,” she said. “If the student is (providing) the second income in the family, then they might have a chance. A lot of them live at home with their parents and have roommates.”

Cital, for example, owes \$37,000 for school loans. Although he enjoys a relatively good salary at UC Davis, he said he worries that once he starts paying off his debt this year, he'll have to scrimp to cover gas, parking and fees associated with the profession.

Heavy borrowing to cover the fast-rising cost of veterinary school is a familiar theme for veterinarians. In 2010, [new veterinary school graduates with debt](#) were burdened with educational loans averaging more than \$130,000.

For support staff, the often insignificant salary differential between licensed veterinary technicians and non-credentialed veterinary assistants does not serve as an incentive to get the two-year degree, either.

Rick DeMars, who is working on his veterinary technician degree at top-rated Purdue University, doesn't expect to earn much more when he completes the \$18,000 program and gets his license than he makes now as a veterinary assistant.

Currently, the retired military officer makes between \$10 and \$12.50 per hour working part time for two large-animal veterinarians in Oklahoma. “I'll have plenty of work when I graduate,” he

said. “But I’ll probably only make about 50 cents to \$1 an hour more as a technician. I don’t think the degree plays a big role in what vets pay.”

Fortunately for DeMars, he’s able to supplement his income doing equine dental work under a veterinarian’s supervision, where he can make \$75 per hour. DeMars also is pursuing his equine dentistry credential, at an additional cost of \$12,000. He hopes the skills will lead to a full-time equine dentistry job.

Beyond educational costs for technicians are the fees associated with state licensure, professional memberships and continuing education courses.

Shana Roth dreams of working as a veterinary technician at UC Davis Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital, where both the wages and opportunities are good. She wants it so badly that she has put in 22 job applications since November 2010.

Unfortunately for Roth, a 27-year-old single mother with college debt and a part-time non-veterinary job, her associate’s degree in veterinary technology and five years of emergency veterinary hospital experience have not been enough to land a university position.

What would boost her chances, she said, is getting her California state registration, which, including fees, costs \$300 – money she does not currently have.

“It’s a Catch-22, because if I had the job, I would have the money to take the test,” she said.

Specialization an option

Better wages and opportunities can be found for veterinary technicians willing to obtain additional education in a medical specialty. NAVTA now recognizes and has approved 10 different specialty academies that focus on surgery, emergency and critical care, anesthesiology and dentistry, among others.

Cital, the UC Davis veterinary technician, for example, got a credential in anesthesia at the Academy of Surgical Research, and now earns nearly \$50,000 per year.

Still, not everyone needs the additional credential to achieve more financial success.

Gail E. Hedberg, a registered veterinary technician at the San Francisco Zoo, cut her teeth taking care of animals at Marine World Africa USA, then launched a 30-year career at the zoo. Because she belongs to a union and is paid by the city of San Francisco, she receives automatic step raises and now earns \$37 per hour. The best part, she said, is her specialty in maternal and neonatal care, which at one point required her to sleep with a newborn gorilla clinging onto her in a temporary nursery as the adult gorillas sat watching.

Hedberg says for veterinary technicians willing to be proactive, these kinds of jobs are out there. But they are rare.

“It’s a shame there is not better recognition for what we do as an integral part of the veterinary health care team,” she said. "It's taken a long time for our profession to mature. I'm glad I didn't give up. I continue to learn and be challenged. But I could not have stayed in the profession had I not ended up where I did.”