

Today's Veterinary **Business**

COMMUNITY SOCIAL ISSUES



The scourge of discrimination

Ugly acts of bigotry and intolerance are perpetrated by colleagues and clients. Learn what your practice can do to become more diverse and inclusive.

By Sarah Rumble

It was a typical day at the corporate veterinary hospital where Dr. Donna Smith had been employed for nearly a year. After seeing patients, Dr. Smith walked into a central treatment area and saw a noose fashioned from white nylon rope hanging from an overhead examination light.

Dr. Smith, who is African American, asked the other staff members in the room about the noose, which was as long as her arm, and was told it was a joke. Barely able to contain her anguish, she was appalled to have to explain why such a “joke” was inappropriate.

“Then they told me it was used as a snare,” said Dr. Smith, whose name has been changed to protect her identity. “I told them, ‘A snare and a noose are two completely different things.’”

She complained to the practice manager the next day, and the manager’s nonchalant reaction prompted Dr. Smith to contact a regional manager. Corporate representatives went to the hospital and conducted interviews. The practice manager and the person who displayed the noose were disciplined.

“But I still have to work here,” said Dr. Smith, who is under contract and is the only African American veterinarian at the practice. “There are people



who have worked here for a long time [who] made me feel like I ruined the party. Like it's my fault that I'm offended. But I think it's the corporation's fault. They haven't done what they need to do to make this a good environment for me."

Dr. Smith isn't alone. Minority and underrepresented veterinary professionals across the U.S. have faced abhorrent treatment during their careers, ranging from insensitive comments to blatant discrimination from pet owners, colleagues and practice management. Often, the incidents go unreported out of a feeling of powerlessness or fear of retaliation.

How often such events occur in veterinary practice is unknown, but if the profession is like many others, the truth might surprise you. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the agency received more than 76,000 complaints of workplace discrimination in fiscal year 2018, with sexual and racial bias ranking second and fourth, respectively, on the list of allegations.

Stephen Cital, RVT, RLAT, SRA, VCC, VTS-LAM, who is Latino and openly gay and speaks out

publicly on discrimination matters, said inappropriate comments are regularly directed at minority and underrepresented veterinary professionals — from assumptions about the care minority groups provide or don't provide to their pets to questions about what happens in the bedrooms of gay or transgender colleagues.

"There's a general insensitivity or lack of understanding when it comes to making staff members who are minorities feel comfortable in this space," said Cital, the director of education and development at ElleVet Sciences. "It's often passive — not meant to be malicious — but it's still discrimination. You're still judging a book by its cover."

Other Incidents

Under the condition of anonymity, other veterinary professionals shared these accounts.

1 "A few years ago, I was working in the ICU when a pit bull came in suffering from heatstroke. Given the animal's poor prognosis, the owner elected to euthanize. After euthanizing, a technician who I had known for years told me — an African American colleague — that the owners were black and that it was her

experience that people who weren't white didn't know how to take care of animals correctly. The next day, I complained to a supervisor, who did nothing. Days later, I went to the head nurse in our department, who told me that she was disappointed that I would blow things out of proportion."

2 "I am a relatively femme-presenting lesbian, and while I'm generally open about my identity, most people don't guess unless it comes up in a conversation. I was training at a corporate hospital when I found out one of the doctors was notoriously homophobic. A technician whose sister is a lesbian confided that this doctor said her sister was going to hell. I heard the same doctor complain about a client, disgustingly referring to her as a 'butch dyke.' Without disclosing my sexual orientation, I spoke to the doctor's boss about his homophobia, and she shrugged me off."

3 "I recently started a new job with a corporate practice and was told that I had to wear specific-colored head scarves. After seeing girls in other departments wearing differently colored wraps

not for religious reasons, I questioned it. Human resources got involved, and it was decided that as long as it wasn't an offensive pattern, I could wear what I wanted. Not necessarily a huge deal, but it felt important to me."

4 "It was my first night working at a new hospital as an ER assistant. The first patient we saw was a black Lab who was brought in by an elderly woman who was concerned because the seemingly pregnant dog hadn't yet given birth. When the head technician and I took the dog to the treatment area, the technician showed me how to enter notes into the patient's medical record. Under presenting complaint, he typed 'NYD.' Confused, I asked him what NYD meant. With absolutely no shame, he looked me in the eyes and said, '[Expletive] Yard Dog.' That's what the head technician at a specialty practice put as the presenting complaint in the medical record for a patient in congestive heart failure with ascites."

5 "As an African American veterinarian, I've seen pets named [variations of the N-word]. I want to refuse service

HOW THE VETERINARY PROFESSION CAN BE MORE INCLUSIVE

At the individual level

- **Recognize your biases.** “We all have biases,” said Cara Williams, DVM, president of the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association. “If you can identify your biases, you can make a conscious effort to try to counter them when you’re in a position of power and making decisions that affect other people. You can be more aware so you don’t accidentally make racist, sexist or prejudicial decisions that harm others without your intent.”
- **Reach out locally.** Christina Tran, DVM, president-elect of the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association, recommends providing opportunities for community education. “Do webinars or teleconferences for 30 minutes to give those in your community an opportunity to talk to a veterinarian and learn about what veterinarians do,” she said. “If you’re a minority and people can see you and see that maybe they look like you, it works to break down the barriers so that kids can see this is a real career option for them.”
- **Step outside your comfort zone.** “Try to walk in the shoes of someone different from you,” said Allen Cannedy, DVM, director of diversity and multicultural affairs at the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine. “Think about the big picture and how you can help benefit others in need.”
- **Speak up.** If you see something, say something. Don’t allow discrimination to occur in front of you and not do something about it.

At the organizational level

- **Ensure your team is diverse.** “If you don’t have someone who looks different than you on your leadership team, or in the group or organization, you should be asking why not,” Dr. Cannedy said. “And, you should find ways to be more inclusive.” Stephen Cital, RVT, RLAT, SRA, VCC, VTS-LAM, the director of education and development at ElleVet Sciences, recommends that large or corporately owned practices, associations and organizations create diversity committees. Comprising a diverse group of individuals, these panels would help write inclusive protocols, ensure that instances of potential discrimination are handled properly, have a voice in the hiring of employees, and plan culture-centered staff events.

- **Make sure your leadership is inclusive.** Don’t alienate staff or anyone else in the industry by tolerating exclusive or hateful behavior, whether the actions occur professionally or privately. That goes for social media posts, too. “Biases toward certain groups of people and discriminatory political views will inherently carry over to voting or leadership decisions,” Cital said. “By allowing this kind of behavior, even on a personal social media page, you are encouraging this kind of behavior, and you are alienating many of your members.”
- **Confront the problem.** Veterinary groups that host continuing education events shouldn’t be afraid to tackle this subject head on. “Have the conversation, have forums, have lectures, have meetups that deal specifically with this issue,” Cital said.
- **Engage underrepresented people.** “The institutions can do more to reach out to underrepresented communities to educate them and to recruit youth into the veterinary profession,” Dr. Williams said. “Start young, and provide support throughout elementary school, high school and undergrad.”

At the academic level

- **Remove outdated and exclusive policies.** “Many schools are following rules, regulations and criteria that have been set up to be exclusive rather than inclusive,” Dr. Cannedy said. An example is the Graduate Record Examinations, which many veterinary schools still require. “Most of our data shows that the GRE score is insignificant in determining success in our DVM program or success as a veterinarian after graduating from school,” Dr. Cannedy said. “The GRE can create a barrier for access to veterinary colleges for certain demographic groups and has been eliminated by several veterinary programs as a requirement.”
- **Promote diversity.** Dr. Williams believes that all veterinary schools should have a position similar to Cannedy’s at North Carolina State — one focused on ensuring that veterinary schools are more diverse. “Veterinary schools should work to hire professors from diverse backgrounds,” Dr. Williams said. “Those in leadership roles at colleges should mentor people who don’t look like them.”



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to these pet owners, but at the corporate practice where I am employed, I could be written up for refusing service because of a pet's name."

6 "I was fired from a major Boston-area hospital after being outed as trans and was told it was a violation of their ethics code to not disclose my birth sex."

Predominantly White

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 93% of U.S. veterinarians are white. And while steps are being taken to diversify the industry, underrepresented veterinary professionals agree that more needs to be done.

"I was the only Asian person in my vet school class," said Christina Tran, DVM, president-elect of the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association and a 2000 graduate of the University of Illinois. "It was the first time I experienced what I call 'double imposter syndrome.' I was doubting whether or not I should have gotten into vet school to begin with. I thought it was some kind of clerical error, or maybe they just let me in because I'm Asian — because I check a box, that I didn't actually deserve to be there, or that I took somebody else's spot."

Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association President Cara Williams, DVM, who identifies as mixed black and white,

grew up in Chicago and earned her degree in 2013 from the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Williams was one of two mixed-race students in her class.

"We're just waiting for the problem to correct itself," Dr. Williams said. "School administrators have told me that if only there were more minority candidates, more qualified applicants to the veterinary profession, then our schools would be more diverse.

"I've even had administrators tell me that minorities don't consider their pets as family and that's why they don't go into the veterinary field. These assumptions about the lack of qualified candidates and the cultural

stereotypes about our opinions toward animals are simply untrue."

Allen Cannedy, DVM, director of diversity and multicultural affairs at the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine, is working to diversify the veterinary profession.

"Out of a total applicant pool of 706 for the 2023 class, we had 151 self-identified underrepresented minority applicants," Dr. Cannedy said. "We have offered admission for 34% of the class to these underrepresented minorities, which could be a new record for us. I doubt we'll get all of them, but we're truly making intentional efforts to increase diversity in our program."



According to a 2018-19 report released by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, 19.6% of students at U.S. veterinary colleges were underrepresented minorities, a number that has risen from 9.7% in 2005.

can male, it's important for me to interact with diverse communities, whether it's me personally, where I live, the work I do, or taking care of my family members, including my pets," said Rhodes, who takes his pets to an African Amer-

ican veterinarian. "I want someone who can relate to some of the issues I might have as a person of color with pets that need quality care."

color to become associat-

ed with veterinary medicine, but he also stressed the legal ramifications if practice owners and veterinary leaders don't properly address diversity and discrimination concerns. "Dr. King said the law can't make you love a person, but it should provide the impetus to keep you from actively discriminating or putting them in a disadvantageous position," Rhodes said.

it's through the Civil Rights Commission, local state commissions that address issues of discrimination or the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission]."

American Veterinary Medical Association policies on diversity and inclusion encourage people to raise concerns about workplace discrimination, Rhodes said. But more work needs to be done, he said.

"It's about creating the conditions for a climate and a culture in each of the operations ... where people feel comfortable to bring forth issues or concerns they may have because that, more than anything, is going to be what mitigates the potential risks that practice owners might have as it relates to discrimination," Rhodes said.

For those affected by discrimination and the lack of diversity in the veterinary profession, changes can't come soon enough.

After hearing some of the accounts, Cital was moved. "It hurts," he said, "and I'm embarrassed it happens in our industry." ■



"Veterinary colleges are the gatekeepers of the profession," Dr. Cannedy said. "When it comes to diversity, these backroom discussions need to be brought out front. We need to tackle the elephant in the room and just take it on."

Why Diversity Matters

Julius Rhodes, SPHR, the founder and principal of the Chicago human resources firm Mpr Group, has been involved with issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion for more than 30 years.

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can veterinarian. "I want someone who can relate to some of the issues I might have as a person of color with pets that need quality care."

Rhodes spoke at the National Association of Black Veterinarians meeting in June. NABV, a newly formed group, hopes to raise awareness about the low number of black veterinarians — it's less than 1% — and develop a plan to increase diversity in the profession.

Part of Rhodes' talk focused on the role that black veterinarians play in encouraging people of

advantageous position is exactly where Dr. Smith feels she has been in since seeing the noose.

"The issue is not if the perpetrator of the incident believes a comment, joke or act is appropriate," Rhodes said. "The issue is always how the comment, joke or act is perceived by the individual it was directed toward."

"The individual who received the comments always has an opportunity to pursue claims, whether

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