

What Can't Be Taught

Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

Passionate Canadian Veterinary Medical Association life member shares valuable wisdom

Alexandra Schlesiger

“I have few, if any regrets, that would make me want to start over and do something differently in my career,” states Dr. Clayton MacKay. “One day, while traveling to Washington for an animal welfare meeting in the late 1980s, for a moment, I was sure I was going to die in a plane crash in Buffalo during a violent thunderstorm. As my life flashed before me, my only regret was that my life was ending in Buffalo, not in a more exciting place like Paris, Tokyo, or Melbourne. Somehow this comforted me, I knew I was on the right track and that I would be able to handle any problem.”

Dr. MacKay, a life member of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), is a career veterinarian with 22 years of experience as a companion animal practice owner, and 4 years in academic administration of a veterinary teaching hospital. Dr. MacKay has spent 13 years working in the veterinary industry, including his role as the Director of Veterinary Affairs at Hill's Pet Nutrition Canada. He also has 45 years of involvement in organized veterinary medicine under his belt, including past roles as President of the American Animal Hospital Association, Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, College of Veterinarians of Ontario, Toronto Academy of Veterinary Medicine, and the Society of Veterinary Medical Ethics.

Dr. MacKay's interests now include increasing the visibility and importance of veterinary medicine to the public *via* speaking engagements and presentations throughout North America, Europe, and Asia on practice management, pet nutrition, and the future of the veterinary profession. His specialties include business consulting for veterinary practices, providing an overview and history of the veterinary profession, and networking global connections in the companion animal practice world.

“Dr. Clayton MacKay is an outstanding veterinarian, mentor, and colleague, with many national and international contribu-

tions to the veterinary profession,” says Dr. Bernhard Pukay, a fellow CVMA life member and Past-President, CEO, and general practitioner of the Alta Vista and Bayview Animal Hospitals.

“He is highly regarded for his thoughtful demeanor, his true interest in people, and his insight into the challenges and opportunities we all face. For over 40 years, Dr. MacKay has mentored many talented veterinarians, helping them accomplish their goals and understand the breadth and depth of veterinary medicine.”

Dr. MacKay, a second-generation veterinarian, graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) like his father. He entered private practice, becoming a partner in MacKay Animal Clinic and, in 1993, he returned to OVC's Veterinary Teaching Hospital as the Director. Dr. MacKay has volunteered countless hours serving as President for many notable organizations and as an advisor to the Pickering, Ajax, and Whitby Animal Control for 15 years.

Dr. MacKay grew up watching his father, who, at a young age, gave him insight into what the working life of a veterinarian entailed. However, because of his active involvement in high school, and then university, Dr. MacKay formulated his own methods for dealing with multi-tasking. “I participated in school sports and clubs and volunteered in student activities,” says Dr. MacKay. “While I understood the value of my academics, I somehow knew I needed to add to my soft skills which were not taught or rarely mentioned in my school curriculums or early in my veterinary career.”

Mental health in veterinary medicine has been an important topic of discussion, especially over the past few years. Dr. MacKay became involved in creating awareness around the profession's mental health and potential suicide crisis when former CVMA President, Dr. Douglas Roberts, asked him to present his paper titled “Health Risks for Veterinarians” at the 2010 CVMA Convention Summit, an annual forum in which Canadian and international veterinary leaders share information on key veterinary issues. “Having personal knowledge of at least 3 suicide cases involving veterinarians, including my retired partner and father, mental health issues have become very important in my life,” explained Dr. MacKay. “Preparing for the CVMA Summit exposed me to a subject that, up to that point, I only paid attention to in passing. Giving that talk, and ones that followed, gave me insight into the mental health risks all veterinarians may face in their lives. Until that time, I had never used the words suicide and veterinarian in the same sentence, even though suicide ended my father's life.” From that

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point forward, he has continued to spend time on mental health issues, helping anyone he can and supporting veterinary medical associations provide resources and help for their members.

One thing Dr. MacKay learned in veterinary college is that success is not born out of high marks and class standings. “During my undergrad, I took the time to do many things which, in my opinion, were the additional puzzle pieces that allowed me to have a lifetime of pleasure in my chosen career,” says Dr. MacKay. “While at times I wished I dedicated more time to my studies, I found that learning how to manage a student government or fraternity gave me insights unavailable to every student. Finding out you can carry on and learn something from failure became more and more important in my life as a clinician, business owner, academic administrator, and member of the veterinary industry.”

One piece of advice Dr. MacKay has for new graduates is to not get too set in what they foresee as their future. “Prepare extensively for the most rapidly changing environment you have ever seen,” he urges. “Doors will open, and you need to be prepared to walk through them, regardless of what is on the other side.”

In 1968, at 24 years old, Dr. MacKay took his first airplane from Toronto to Saskatoon to visit the brand new Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM), as its first class graduated, and to host a CVMA annual meeting. Along with a fellow OVC student, 2 students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (FMV) of the University of Montreal and 2 from WCVM, they attempted to transform the CVMA’s student

association into a Canada-wide group, instead of only OVC students. At that time, Dr. MacKay was elected as the first President of what is now known as the Students of the CVMA, representing all 5 Canadian veterinary colleges. “Unfortunately, in that first year, FMV chose not to join, so we moved forward with just OVC and WCVM,” says Dr. MacKay. “Again, an early personal lesson in failing that has allowed me to accomplish many wonderful things since then.”

Dr. MacKay shares the CVMA’s opinion that mentorship today is more important than ever. “During my undergrad, Dr. Jim Lennox, a practitioner turned faculty member, was always available, professionally and personally, with great advice and more importantly a listening ear for my problems, real or perceived,” he says. “I understand that undergraduates and recent graduates ask for such people but, in my experience, they don’t seek this help often. As a registered mentor in the CVMA Mentorship Program for over 4 years, I have yet to see a new graduate seek advice from me. Whether new graduates are unaware of the program or uncertain of the available help, I know there are several amazing veterinarians on the CVMA mentor roster who could offer sound counsel to anyone in need. Just ASK!”

“Dr. MacKay has been a leader, pioneer, and teacher for many generations of veterinarians and through many changes in the profession,” asserts Dr. Pukay. “He has a genuine passion for the profession, a high level of integrity, and is always contributing his time to the advancement of veterinary medicine and its role in society.”

