

# What Can't Be Taught

## Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

### Dr. Michelle Oakley shares poignant lessons

Alexandra Schlesiger

**O**n January 13, 2018, Dr. Michelle Oakley, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) member and star of National Geographic Wild's reality show *Dr. Oakley: Yukon Vet*, addressed the Students of the CVMA (SCVMA) at the annual SCVMA Symposium's keynote speaker.

In a packed lecture hall at the Atlantic Veterinary College (AVC), Dr. Oakley's alma mater, eager veterinary students hailing from every Canadian veterinary college listened intently to Dr. Oakley's captivating 2-hour lecture titled, *Yukon Vet; Will Film for Food*.

Dr. Oakley spoke fondly of her time pursuing a doctorate in veterinary medicine at AVC, while simultaneously raising 2 of her 3 daughters. She regaled students with the story of surprising one of her mentors, Dr. Jeanne Lofstedt, AVC professor and CVMA Life Member, by carrying her 6-week-old baby into school one day, an occurrence that never happened back then, at least not to her knowledge. Dr. Oakley couldn't hide the tears in her eyes as she told students that after Dr. Lofstedt saw Shane, her husband, carrying their baby into the college so she could feed her multiple times a day in a corner, she created a private nursing room for her; fully equipped with toys, a comfortable chair, and a soft light, as opposed to the fluorescent overhead ceiling lights in the college. "I can't thank Dr. Lofstedt enough and I'll always be grateful," said Dr. Oakley.

When asked how she cultivates a good work-life balance with such a demanding career, Dr. Oakley said that, although ways to cultivate a good work-life balance are personal and depend on the individual; one thing she recommends is not taking on too much. "Veterinary students are perfectionists, many have Type A personalities and think they have to do everything to the max, but learning to let some things go and delegating and sharing work with coworkers is something we all need to work on," advises Dr. Oakley. "And when you do have time off, take the time off; I remember reading articles during my time off when I should have been out with my kids. Of course, you have to find ways to keep up, but really, completely getting away from work when you do have off time is important." Dr. Oakley also

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**Figure 1.** Dr. Michelle Oakley (left) with Ms. Karie Bryenton, SCVMA Committee representative from the Atlantic Veterinary College and the 2018 SCVMA Symposium Chair.

noted that although early-career veterinarians should not expect to have a lot of time off in the first few years, they should still remember to be kind to themselves and not forget what really matters; the people they love and the other animals in their life.

One thing Dr. Oakley wishes she learned in veterinary college is to not focus on one area too early. "Some students think 'Why do I have to learn all this small animal stuff because I'm just going to be a pig vet?' but it is really important to keep your focus blurry and your options open," she says. She remembers her professors telling students they need to get their basic skills down before they sharpen their focus and that their first few years in practice should be spent performing routine clinical work, surgical skills and becoming proficient with many of the medicines they will be using. "I didn't take my professor's advice to heart and in vet school, I felt the same way; 'Why do we have to learn everything when we should be focusing and specializing?' but that's a really bad idea," explains Dr. Oakley. "It is imperative you understand all the different fields of veterinary medicine because in the long run, it will make you a way better pig vet, meat inspection vet, or small animal vet. Understanding all of the other aspects of veterinary medicine can even help solve problems with a specific animal you're treating."

With a spotlight on mental health in veterinary medicine the past few years, Dr. Oakley was asked to share some ways she helps support her own personal wellbeing and while physical exercise, including running, skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking, was at the top of her list, so was laughter. "You need to laugh;

I know it is tough because you don't want to seem unprofessional, but while working in a couple of clinics, we laugh a lot," says Dr. Oakley. "You have to be careful because you don't want to be overheard and have the context misunderstood, but while still being concerned about the health and pain management of our patients, we laugh and we joke and if our patients could, they would be laughing with us also. Working in a clinic can be an emotional rollercoaster every day, so it is really important to laugh or find what works for you because an hour later you may feel like crying. Laughing and joking a bit while still focussing and being cautious so I'm not misunderstood, is what keeps me going or else I find it's too easy to let things get to you and become too serious."

Given the chance to go back and do some things differently in her career, Dr. Oakley said she would change 2 things: i) she would go back and give her husband more time to do things he would have liked to do, and ii) she would have found better ways to deal with issues. "I had a lot of fantastic mentors, but I also had a difficult one," says Dr. Oakley. "When I became pregnant during a caribou project with my third daughter, he basically told me I wasn't committed to the work, even though I started the project, came up with the idea, proposed it, and went out in the field and did it, and he said he couldn't believe I got pregnant with 2 more years left on the project. It was a really difficult time for me and the next year, when he was the lead, he basically said, 'You can't come in the field with your baby,' (we had set it up so my husband could bring the baby because I didn't want to wean her). So my choice was either wean the baby at 6 months old and go to work or don't. I chose not to wean her, thank God, but I didn't handle the situation well. I just gave up and said, 'fine,' but was angry about it for a long time and I should have found reasonable ways to discuss it and speak up. A lot of my past issues or mistakes have been from lacking the people skills needed to find ways to speak up in a non-combative or argumentative way and I feel I've learned them now, but I had to learn them through hard lessons. I have had so many wonderful mentors and great supporters, starting here at AVC and all the way throughout my career, but sometimes, it is still tough as a woman in male dominated fields."

Dr. Oakley went on to speak about the positive mentors she has had throughout her career, such as Dr. Sandie Black, who is now the Calgary Zoo's head veterinarian. She feels their patience and belief in knowing she could do something, be it a small project or little procedure, and standing back and supporting her not only while she did it, but also if she did something incorrectly, was instrumental in her career. Dr. Oakley is still in contact with many of her mentors and urges students to seek out their own mentors and take advantage of as many learning opportunities as possible.

Dr. Oakley provided great advice for students to remember when transitioning into their careers. "We all make mistakes, that's what liability insurance is for — be as honest and open

as possible with your clients; that is always the best policy," she explains. "When you make a mistake, protect your heart, accept that mistakes will happen, and move on knowing you went into it with the best intentions. And love your clients, even the quirky ones, because they're all teaching you." Dr. Oakley also urged students not to stress about remembering everything at the beginning of their careers. "Even with so many things to remember, you still think you will remember them and the sad truth is you won't. But you need to learn it all in school anyway, so you'll have the general concept later and in your career, when you come across a case you're unsure of, you'll look up what you need to know and it will come back to you. And once you do it 5 to 10 times, you'll remember it."

Although Dr. Oakley would never describe herself as a "badass" and told students it's hilarious and a little awkward when she is portrayed as one in her show, in fact, she is a perfect embodiment of just that. Dr. Oakley does not try to look tough, she just is tough, she stays true to herself, and she does not give up. She pushes herself to be better despite hardships, she shows kindness to the weak, and she realizes her limits and that is the true definition of a badass.

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## SPRING CE SESSIONS

Organized by the CVMA-SBCV Chapter, the Spring CE Sessions include Cardiology, Surgery and Pain Management, and Feline Diabetes, Chronic Kidney Disease in Cats, and the Geriatric Cat.

Chapter members enjoy a 50% discount on registration fees.

Participants may attend one or more days as they wish. Each day offers a CE Certificate for 6 hours.



### ABBOTSFORD ON MAY 9

**Cardiology with Meg Sleeper,**  
VMD, BS, Dipl. ACVIM (Cardiology)



### NANAIMO ON MAY 10

**Cardiology with Meg Sleeper,**  
VMD, BS, Dipl. ACVIM (Cardiology)



### KELOWNA ON MAY 17

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**with Chris Jordan,**  
BSc (Hons), BVetMed, Dipl. ECVS, MRCVS  
**and Tara Edwards,**  
DVM, Dipl. ACVSMIR, CCRT, CVPP



### NELSON ON MAY 30

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DVM, Dipl. ABVP (Feline Practice)

