Message from Outgoing SCVMA President

It has been an exciting year representing Canadian veterinary students on the CVMA Council. Travelling to the Ottawa Council Meetings, and the CVMA Annual Conventions in Halifax and Montreal, I have witnessed the dedication that the CVMA Council and Executive members have in promoting the best interest of Canadian veterinarians in the huge breadth of activities and initiatives that CVMA is involved. I am going to miss the CVMA Council and the hard-working students of the SCVMA Committee. The SCVMA Committee meets twice a year to discuss various initiatives for students including lunch hour talks, editorials, the VetRap Newsletter, the New Graduate Survey, and the annual SCVMA Symposium. I strongly encourage all veterinary students to attend the annual SCVMA Student Symposium. It is an amazing opportunity to meet and network with students across Canada as it is the only Symposium held by Canadian students for Canadian students. Upon graduation, I strongly encourage all students to maintain their CVMA membership as the CVMA is our “One Voice” representing our veterinary profession on the national and international level.

Good luck in all your studies and future career!

Crystal Riczu
2011-2012 SCVMA President
UCVM Class of 2013

The Journey of Becoming a Veterinarian at the University of Calgary

Crystal Riczu

In the fall of 2008, the University of Calgary, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (UCVM) accepted its first class, who proudly graduated in May 2012.

The UCVM Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program is a four-year degree; the first year emphasizing “normal” in anatomy and physiology, the second year focusing on diagnostics (clinical pathology and imaging), pharmacology, and infectious agents (bacteriology, virology, parasitology), and third year focusing on treating diseases in medicine and surgery courses for small, large, exotic, and lab animals. During this time students also learn about animal behaviour and welfare, zoonotic diseases, and promoting public and food safety as well as the importance of clinical skills, professional skills and diagnostic.

The fourth year begins one week after third-year finals, and it is delivered over a full calendar year from May to April. UCVM does not have a centralized teaching hospital. It has a Distributed Veterinary Learning Community (DVLC) made up of public and private practices, provincial and federal agencies, non-government organizations, and industry partners who provide two- to four-week practicum rotations distributed primarily throughout Alberta with a few rotations offered across Canada and other international locations.

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All UCVM DVM students receive a general veterinary education during the first three years with an additional 40 weeks in fourth year for practical rotations. Twenty weeks are mandatory, which includes two weeks of Clinical and Anatomic Pathology, two weeks of Molecular Diagnostic and Imaging, and four months of General Veterinary Practice where students spend a month each in an equine, production, small animal and rural practice within Alberta.

The remaining 20 weeks are split to allow 10 weeks dedicated to enhanced opportunities in four Areas of Emphasis (AOE): Production Animal Health (PAH), Equine Health, Ecosystem and Public Health (EPH), and Investigative Medicine (IM) and 10 weeks for their own educational interests. There are many exciting electives to choose from. For example, the Equine AOE includes theriogenology, dentistry, lameness, ambulatory, and sports medicine, and the EPH AOE includes zoos, shelters, wildlife and coastal health facilities, provincial, national, and international agencies, as well as a six-week Tanzania Global Health Field School to promote the well-being of people and animals in Tanzania, and a two-week Aboriginal and Community Health and Wellness Rotation where students provide education, vaccination, wellness exams, and elective surgery in remote communities in the NWT.

Throughout these rotations students are evaluated on clinical interactions and technical skills. Students are also required to complete electronic case-logs in which all students must present one case every second Thursday to students who are viewing online. Students are able to provide case material to the UCVM Diagnostic Services Unit for pathology and necropsy which not only enhances the student’s education on the case, but provides valuable cases for the other three classes at UCVM to learn from in their pathology courses.

In terms of exams, the infamous NAVLE will be written in November/December of 2012, followed by a case-based exam at the completion of rotations in April, emphasizing clinical reasoning, problem solving, and the application of foundational principles and knowledge to cases commonly encountered by new graduates.

The DVLC is an interesting model for a teaching hospital. While some students selected their rotations to stay within the Calgary area, others experienced moving once or twice a month in which they quickly learned how to become an expert at car and house cleaning, laundry, packing, and running errands in the few days off between rotations. The hours are not your typical 8 to 5 classroom time, but from when the clinic opens until close, with some expectation for evenings, weekends, and on-call, as would be expected once a student graduates. It’s a priceless opportunity to experience the farms and the community and to see how practices functions, as some may be more remote or not have the newest technology, emphasizing the importance of basic and traditional medicine. Although it may not be the traditional method of veterinary education, the quantity and quality of cases, the theoretical, rounds, and hands-on education, combined with real-life experience and mentorship by the DVLC members has proven an exceptional educational experience for the students of UCVM.

AVC student

It is strange that people travel hundreds of miles from home to have a life changing experience. Perhaps that is the only way to truly escape an old self and start welcoming in a new one. My life changing experience occurred the summer of 2010 while working with rural small holder farmers in Kenya. In this beautiful and diverse country, the cradle of humanity, I learned a great deal about the concept of One Health and the responsibility that volunteer professionals such as veterinarians have to the developing world. The volunteer project I took part in was organized through Veterinarians Without Borders (VWB) and Farmers Helping Farmers (a well established and successful PEI-based non-governmental organization). Over the course of two and a half months, myself and my fellow VWB partner Vionna Kwan would travel all over Kenya and take part in a number of projects designed to provide medical assistance and education to hard working small holder farmers. The following is a brief synopsis of my time in Kenya and the insight I gained from the experience.

During the first month and a half of our stay in Kenya, we were based out of the Wakulima Dairy Co-op, which is located in Murkerweni town in Central Province (just south of Mount Kenya). The Co-op was founded in 1994 by Farmers Helping Farmers. Since the founding of the Co-op, the Dairy has been a largely autonomous entity and has been growing and expanding under the impetus and ingenuity of its 6000 member farms.

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The vast majority of farms in the Central Province region are small holder zero grazing type farms with anywhere between one to four cattle. The farms themselves are nestled in the lush foothills at the base of Mount Kenya and are usually perched precariously on steep, mudslide prone inclines. There is no electricity and little to no reliable transportation in the region and it can take hours to reach an urban center. The Co-op sends out trucks twice a day to collect milk from farms all over the country side and then consolidates it in a communal cooled bulk tank at the Dairy. Without the Dairy, farmers in Murkerweni and the surrounding region would be severely handicapped. It has been an incredible success story.

When we arrived on farms we would be hailed with hearty Karibu’s (welcome!), and when we left we were followed with sincere Asante Sana’s (thanks so much!). In exchange for permitting us to collect data from their farms, farmers would receive in recompense free consultation and medical care for their animals. A typical farm visit would proceed roughly as follows. After a prolonged and chatty greeting, we would begin by measuring stall dimensions and the presence and distribution of fecal matter inside and outside of stalls. Based on the stall design, we would make suggestions to the farmers that could improve the comfort of their cows and hopefully increase their milk output and decrease the occurrence of mastitis on their farm. Each of the farmer’s cows were then placed in the milking stocks where we would perform a quick physical exam, establish a body condition score, and collect fecal and milk samples. The cows would then be treated with an appropriate anthelmintic (based on the pregnancy status of the cow). The data from the study was analyzed in Nairobi, and a report was given to each of the farms visited so they would have access to the outcomes of the study (ie: concerning parasite load and presence of specific mastitis causing organisms on their farm). Once our work was complete, more good natured chatter would ensue and we would inevitably be sent away over burdened with fresh fruit and good will.

The second half of our stay in Kenya was spent in Nakuru. The landscape here was drastically different from what we had encountered on the mountain. In the surrounding distance were the ancient Ngong Hills of the Great Rift Valley (believed to be the birth place of humanity) and arid plains dotted with acacia trees and herds of zebras. In Nakuru, we worked under the supervision of Dr. Troy Sammons who is the resident missionary veterinarian at the ROHI school. ROHI is a privately funded, self-sustaining school with its own onsite farm. The students and teachers grow their own vegetables and raise their own livestock with the surpluses being sold at the local market. Students at ROHI are typically either street kids or have been rescued from abusive and destructive situations at home. Both Vionna and I fell in love with these kids and felt so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with them. While on the farm, we harvested crops, processed silage, dehorned and castrated goats, purchased cattle, and performed a myriad of other tasks. The most rewarding part of our time there, however, was the community work we took part in with the students.

There is a community in Nakuru that squats on a very thin, rocky strip of land surrounding a local dump. The people here live in conditions of extreme poverty and have capitalized on the food waste of the dump by raising pigs there. The swine were allowed to roam at will amongst the refuse of the dump and their access to clean water was very sporadic which raised public health issues concerning the presence of zoonotic diseases such as Sarcocystis. To meet this need, Vionna and I along with Troy and the ROHI students put together a days worth of presentations for the people in this community that focused on how to raise and care for swine. Some of the talks included housing, nutrition, breeding, farrowing, water, disease management, zoonotic diseases, and record keeping. The talks were followed up with a field trip to one of the local farmers who started off at the dump with a single pig. He now legally owns a piece of land and raises more than 20 pigs on it which, for that community, was an incredible inspiration. Personally however, the real success story came a couple of days later when a ROHI social worker told us that the people at the dump had already started putting some of our tips into action. At that time, the farmers had begun to contain their flocks by constructing more appropriate housing for their animals. I was blown away to think that change had been implemented so quickly. It was the crowning point of the summer.

Everywhere we went in Kenya we saw progressive ideas and a fusion of technology and the environment. Many of the farms we visited had biogas stoves that harvest methane from the manure produced by their livestock, which can then be used for cooking. Needless to say this is an incredibly environmentally friendly source of energy which has significant health impacts on women which have traditionally suffered from lung and eye problems due to smoke exposure from cook fires. Cell phones are prolific and Kenya was one of the first African countries to incorporate cell phone banking. Everyone grows their own food (in urban and rural centers) year around and what cannot be grown is bought locally from other farmers. While we were there, in August of 2010, the country took a major step forward by voting in a new constitution, which promises gender equality, land redistribution, and an increased parliamentary oversight of presidential appointments and decisions. Such progressiveness made it clear to me that the future of the planet lies in developing countries such as Kenya that can learn from the mistakes of more developed countries. As a veterinarian and a student, I felt honoured to be there to witness that development first hand and provide education that would hopefully improve the well being of farming families, their animals, and the environment they live in. This is the founding concept of Ore Health and I find it incredibly exciting to be a part of that.
The Ontario Veterinary College is Celebrating a Birthday!

Hillary Peach (OVC)

The year 2012, the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) celebrates its 150th anniversary, having opened its doors in Toronto in 1862, later moving to the current site in Guelph in 1922. The OVC is the oldest veterinary college in North America, and as such we have our fair share of history and traditions. This year has been about celebrating those traditions, and continuing to grow the veterinary profession with new ones.

In January, the OVC hosted the 25th annual SCVMA Symposium. Students from the five Canadian veterinary colleges participated in the three-day event, which showcased the curriculum, facilities and faculty here at the OVC. As well it gave students an opportunity to meet with professors, network with their peers from other institutions, and discuss the similarities and differences they encounter across Canada within the veterinary medicine program. The SCVMA Symposium continues to be the only student organized and run event of its kind in Canada, giving invaluable opportunity to students to allow them to connect with their future colleagues.

As part of gearing up for the 150th celebrations, the Challenge Cup Hockey Tournament (which was established in 1931 and the world’s oldest veterinary hockey tournament!) was a monumental success. Organized over the course of a few weeks it showcased the hidden hockey talent of OVC students and faculty alike, culminating in the success of the 2013 Golden Phoenixes placing first in the co-ed division, and the 2012 Silver Foxes in the women’s division. This year’s Challenge Cup was also a memorable one due to the hard work of one Dr. Brad Hanna, constructing the Challenge Cup trophy, which features nearly all of the past Challenge Cups champions engraved on its surface.

Another longstanding tradition at the OVC is a passion for international volunteer work. This year, travelling to seven different countries, five teams of veterinary students spent their summers immersed in volunteer projects across the globe as part of Global Vets. Projects ranged from work in elephant sanctuaries in Thailand, to working with animals seized as part of illegal trafficking in Bolivia to assisting mobile veterinarians in East Africa. Global Vets is a volunteer program at the OVC that allows students to travel to different countries to experience other aspects of veterinary medicine, and the different ways it can impact communities, and how they are able to give back to these communities. Students organize all of their own projects and are responsible for all of their own fundraising. The program is in its 15th year, and continues to be the experience of a lifetime for all the students involved.

In an effort to establish new traditions, this summer was the first Global Development Symposium, which served to underline “Critical Links between Human and Animal Health.” The Symposium was founded on the One Health principle, bringing together researchers from social, environmental, medical and veterinary backgrounds to face issues in global development.

If you find yourself back in Guelph over the next few months, be sure to stop in and learn a little bit more about our school, and maybe be a part of one of our many traditions, we would be glad to have you!
What Does “Mindfulness” Mean to You?

Shannon Gruen (WCVM)

Veterinary school delivers hurdle after hurdle for students to overcome. Sometimes these challenges seem too much to take. One professor recognized this issue and began work on an elective that would target the origins of stress and provide techniques to manage them.

Dr. Trisha Dowling is a Clinical Pharmacology professor at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM) and she has witnessed first hand the stress that plagues the veterinary student body. In 2009, she developed a mindfulness program and proposed it to the WCVM faculty. In 2010, the Mindful Veterinary Practice (MVP) elective changed the lives of 20 students.

Dr. Dowling describes the MVP elective as training to “strike a balance between a vigilant and relaxed state of mind, teaching students to notice subtle distractions (thoughts, feelings, emotions, bodily sensations) while repeatedly bringing attention back to an object of focus (the breath).” The MVP elective is based on the teachings of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. This program was created to promote life balance and self-care for both patients and healthcare professionals. Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.”

The MVP course teaches four techniques for intrapersonal self-awareness that can be used in everyday life. These techniques include the body scan, sitting meditation, walking meditation and mindful movement. They are practiced within the classroom as well as assigned for homework. In addition to these activities, classroom discussions are also a large portion of the elective. The discussions allow students to share their experiences and views on stress, as well as coping mechanisms, in a safe environment. Students are often quick to judge the MVP exercises, as they may have never tried or even heard of them before.

Dr. Dowling’s response is this: “just try it for seven weeks and then judge whether or not the mindfulness training was useful.” Many discussions with participants have clearly indicated that in the end, students did not just find this elective useful, they found it life altering. One student said it was “reassuring to realize that once [she] had been introduced to the mindfulness techniques [she] couldn’t forget them.” Another described the journey as difficult at first but having a profound impact in the end, allowing him to now live “moment by moment, and breath by breath.”

We may be a long way away from eliminating stress in our everyday lives but because of the devotion of people like Dr. Dowling, we can now see the light at the end of the tunnel. I encourage all students to participate in their own stress busting program. Whether it be a veterinary-specific initiative or a program put on by a community group, step outside your comfort zone and try it out. I hope that you too may encounter a life-altering experience and live a less stressful life because of it.

Stress is not gender specific:
In 2010, there were no male participants in the MVP elective. In 2011, there was one. In 2012, out of the 20 participants in the MVP elective, seven of them were male. That’s 47% of all the males in the WCVM’s Class of 2013!
Right from the horse’s mouth

Student feedback on the MVP course

1. Tell me about a “light bulb” moment (a personal breakthrough or realization) that you experienced while in the Mindful Practice elective.

“A lightbulb moment for me was when I realized that you can integrate mindful practices into your day to day life without sacrificing time. While you have to consciously think about it, it is nice to be able to use a number of smaller steps to achieve a larger goal rather than setting aside a large chunk of time in the day.”

2. What was your favourite part of the class?

“The group discussions were my favourite part of the class. It was interesting to see how different people viewed stress and how everyone had their own coping mechanisms.”

3. If you could share a “Mindful tidbit” with a student who wasn’t able to participate in the elective, what would it be?

“Do little things differently and pay attention to your reactions: wear your watch on your other wrist or brush your teeth with your other hand. Embrace the frustration!”

Trying to make a Little Difference...

Valérie Bissonnette (FMV)

Since the foundation of Le Refuge Chats in 1991, the students of the Faculté de médecine Vétérinaire (FMV) are actively trying to help decrease the number of euthanasia among cats and dogs. It started with two cages in the university hospital and it now has the capacity to accommodate 35 cats and six dogs. This year we celebrated our 3000th cat adoption and our 900th dog adoption. Even though we are very encouraged by those results as well as by the gratitude expressed from our clients, we also realize it’s not enough.

It is the main reason why volunteer students started a project of sterilization and treatment of stray animals called the Projet CHATS, which is aimed mostly towards cats because of the over population situation in Quebec. We receive numerous requests from people who try to take care of stray cats albeit their limited resources. The majority of these cats will be terrified of humans which puts their adoption potential very low. Therefore, the project offers to sterilize, deworm and vaccinate the cats for relatively low costs and give them back to their caretaker. In addition to giving the volunteer students from the Refuge an opportunity to be active within their community, the spay and neuter days themselves are a great learning opportunity. New this year, students from the entire Faculty were welcome to lend a hand and participate in the projects. First-year students were under supervision of students who were further along in their curriculum and who also had access at all times to the veterinarians operating the animals.

The animal technicians as well as the security personnel also play an essential part by feeding the stray cats on the campus of the University of Montreal in Saint-Hyacinthe and by helping trap the cats to treat them in the Projets CATS. We are very enthusiastic about the considerable growth of the Projets CHATS and we are infinitely grateful to all of our generous sponsors.