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Do young women's practice ownership aspirations change throughout the course of their veterinary studies?

The increasing proportion of women among the body of UK veterinary surgeons practicing clinical medicine has been consistently highlighted in RCVS surveys (RCVS 2006, 2010, 2014a). Despite women outnumbering men in clinical practice (57% v 43%) in 2014 (RCVS, 2014a) they do not own veterinary practices or hold practice partnerships or leadership positions in proportions that may be expected, even when adjusting for age and experience (RCVS, 2014b).

Research has shown that feminised professions, or tracks within professions, tend to experience negative outcomes such as 'male flight' i.e. a reluctance of young men to enter the profession, and suppressed pay (Reskin and Roos, 1990) among others. This has been witnessed in other feminised professions including law (Bolton and Muzio, 2008) and pharmacy (Gardiner and Stowe, 2006). The feminisation of veterinary medicine is also apparent in other countries such as Canada (Lofstedt, 2003), Australia (Heath and Lanyon, 1996; Heath, 2007), Turkey (Basagac Gul and others, 2008) and the United States (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010), with research highlighting that male flight and salary stagnation in comparison to other professions has occurred in North America (Lofstedt, 2003; Smith, 2002). The increasing trend toward 'feminisation' (defined as comprising of 70% or more females by Meckin and Winfield, 2000; Sappleton, 2009) of the UK profession and the potential implications has attracted academic research interest (Henry and Treanor, 2012; Treanor and others, 2014; Treanor and Marlow, 2016) but remains an underexplored area.

As Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) highlight in their paper, summarised on page N of this issue of *Veterinary Record*, the under-representation of women in ownership and leadership roles has a detrimental effect at the individual level given that practice ownership is associated with higher earnings (Cron and others, 2000). Moreover, practice ownership is also associated with greater clinical freedom than corporate employment (Treanor and others, 2014) which may impact on job satisfaction and animal welfare (BVA concern cited in Lowe, 2009).

Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) highlight the potential positive impacts for the profession in exploring and positively dealing with gender diversity. They contend that, as it remains unknown at what stage career aspirations towards practice ownership are formed, an important first step is establishing the existence of such aspirations among undergraduate students. This study proffers initial insights as to whether undergraduates are inclined or disinclined towards practice ownership, for what reasons, and whether there is a gender differential in such aspirations. Of interest too, is their evaluation of ownership aspirations across year of study. This is particularly important given US findings that there was no differential in career aspirations among students when applying to veterinary school (Amass and others, 2011) but during their first year of study, males became more likely than females to expect to become a practice owner (Bristol, 2011).

The Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) paper undertook an online survey of students across all years of study in the Royal Veterinary College, Bristol University and the Universities of Edinburgh, Liverpool and Nottingham. The survey had three sections; first, it collected demographic data, details of employment history, university leadership roles and curriculum business content. Second, it garnered information pertaining to self-confidence, self-esteem and career aspirations. Finally, it asked questions about women at work such as their awareness of female veterinary role models, childcare facilities and flexible working hours.

Their results highlighted that more male students (83%) than female students (73%) aspired to own a practice; males were also more likely to have held leadership roles in their Students Union or other clubs and societies. They also had significantly higher scores than their female counterparts in relation to confidence (2.9 ± 1.3 v 2.5 ± 1.2 , $p < 0.001$), self-esteem (3.0 ± 1.4 v 2.7 ± 1.3 , $p < 0.001$) and leadership aspiration (9 (-8 to 16) v 7 (-5 to 16), $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, aspiration to practice ownership declined across year of study, with final years being less inclined toward practice ownership than first years. There was an association between ownership aspiration and prior leadership experience, with a similar association for those who had undertaken paid work previously. Students exposed to business education as part of their curriculum were slightly less interested in practice ownership.

While the findings of the Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) study do reveal a gender difference in practice ownership aspiration, it is slight in magnitude when compared to the actual gender difference in ownership and leadership roles within the profession. Arguably, a longitudinal study tracking this student cohort would be informative. The small gender divide noted in this study may translate into a smaller gender divide in the profession at a later point in time when this cohort has amassed sufficient post-qualification experience, associated with practice ownership. Should this smaller differential not materialise, such a longitudinal cohort analysis may provide insight into the personal and/or structural barriers encountered by these young men and women during their early careers that result in differential career outcomes.

Certainly, there is some evidence that, in the past, gendered notions of 'fit work', i.e. areas of work more suited to women, were conveyed during veterinary education and practical work experience placements which, in turn, influenced some women's choice of veterinary practice area e.g. small animal practice (Treanor and others, 2014). However, some women do aspire to practice ownership and have the financial and technical capital to avail of practice partnership opportunities, but are not being afforded these opportunities due to gendered barriers, stereotypes and assumptions or due to existing male owners preferring to sell to corporate chains than pursue succession as an exit strategy (Treanor and others, 2014; Treanor and Marlow, 2016). While Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) have begun to explore a rich and important seam of research, further work is required; further research is also necessary to understand the factors influencing career progression and practice ownership during early careers that may exacerbate or ameliorate these outcomes.

Castro and Armitage-Chan's (2016) findings should be of interest to veterinary educators and leaders. Awareness of female role models within the veterinary profession did not affect the likelihood of ownership aspiration for the young women

surveyed. As the authors highlight, educators can positively impact on confidence and self-esteem in female students through challenging these students' implicit gender stereotypes and self-concepts which may serve to limit the potential opportunities they perceive as available to them in their future careers. To that end, Castro and Armitage-Chan (2016) suggest that assigning more young women to leadership roles in clubs, societies and Student's Unions or designating them as group leaders, may positively impact on their self-perception and leadership aspirations. They also advocate a leadership teaching strategy that is more collaborative and relational as a means to offset the decline in leadership/ownership ambition. This in turn may result in greater job satisfaction, more meritocratic career progression and remuneration for women, and assist in slowing the increasing corporatisation of the veterinary sector.

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