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Editorial on Admissions

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This editorial by Dean Robert R. Marshak, D.V.M. is a revision of an article which originally appeared in *Health Affairs*, Summer, 1974.

Admissions

A wrathful horseowner calls to protest the school's failure to admit a student who is "terribly good with animals." The horseowner lets me know that he is also a successful business executive (machine tools or some such) and that our admissions policy is fundamentally unsound; we are not identifying the "best practitioner material." I leaf through the young man's record and explain that he is a marginal student and that hundreds of applicants have stronger credentials. After a while the horseowner/business executive becomes abusive and threatens political reprisals against the school. I am tempted to ask whether he would like my advice on how to manufacture a better lathe, but in the end I hold my tongue.

A veterinarian visits my office to discuss his son's rejection. The son has a disastrous academic record, but the father insists that he would make a fine practitioner. He has been helping in his father's successful practice and already knows more about "practical veterinary medicine" than most of our graduates. Besides, we seem to be accepting too many women, "most of whom will end up as housewives."

A despairing mother telephones from New England. Her son has been rejected a third time and she is recently widowed. Didn't we take that into consideration? I explain, based on his record, that her son probably could not handle the rigorous veterinary medical curriculum and wouldn't it be wise for him to consider another career. This advice is hard to accept; veterinary medicine has always been his goal. I want to invite her son for counseling, but she hangs up abruptly.

A Washington politician speaks in husky, confidential tones about the son of a friend who was denied admission last year. Will he make it this time? The politician has never before asked the University for anything. He assures me of his continuing support whatever the outcome, but this young man's admission is important to him. Will I review the record and call him back?

A tall man, older looking than most applicants, visits my office without an appointment. He is one of those not invited for interview, an unfavorable sign. He wishes to present himself on the slim chance that his appearance, maturity, and seriousness of purpose will outweigh an undistinguished academic record. He has traveled all the way from Florida, hoping against hope. I call for his record and see that a rejection letter is already in the mail. We talk for an hour discussing his life. He is indeed older than most applicants and has worked hard at many things, always involving animals. He cannot remember a time when he didn't yearn to study veterinary medicine. Though I do not encourage him about next year, he vows not to give up. He will take some rigorous science courses in graduate school at a southern university. Or would it be more advantageous to move north and become a Pennsylvania resident? When he leaves I am filled with sadness, as though I had lived through a tragic episode in the life of my own son.

A mother, father, and daughter—handsome, softspoken, gracious folk—discuss with me the young woman's future direction. She has fine credentials—excellent grades from a small prestigious college (mostly As; a few Bs) and summer experience in a veterinary practice and biological research laboratory. Unfortunately, she resides in West Virginia and there are relatively few places for non-Pennsylvania, non-contract state residents. After explaining the realities, I encourage her to try again. I agree with her parents that the profession will be poorer if she doesn't make it. They comprehend the odds and don't complain, but I sense a deep hurt in what must seem to them gross injustice. They are very proud of the daughter's achievements and this is America.

Inevitably, the selection of a new class by the Admissions Committee signals the beginning of a long series of interviews with unsuccessful applicants and their families. It is a wrenching experience. The majority of applicants have never seriously considered other careers and, after arduous years of preparation, the reality is too painful to bear. In the case of alumni parents there is often a feeling akin to betrayal. There is hardly a time that calls for greater sensitivity and compassion.

More than anything else, unsuccessful applicants desire reassurance that all is not lost and most seek counseling on how to improve their chances in the next round of admissions. Generally, they fall into one of four categories:

- Students with poor or mediocre academic records, with or without real knowledge of veterinary medicine as a career;
- Students with acceptable though not outstanding academic credentials;
- Students with outstanding records, with or without real knowledge of veterinary medicine as a career.
- Special students, e.g. Ph.D.s who wish to change careers.

Except for those in the first category, most are advised either to reapply the following year or to reapply only after significantly strengthening their academic records and/or improving their knowledge of the profession. Special care is taken not to engender excessive optimism. Unfortunately applicants are seldom eligible to apply to more than one, or at the most, two other veterinary schools; medical applicants on the other hand usually apply to a dozen schools, or more.

Understandably, some persons question the fairness of the admissions process; others, pointing to the school's reputation as a distinguished research institution suspect that there may be bias against those applicants who would become practitioners. The latter question can be disposed of by consulting the record, i.e. seventy-five to eighty-five percent of our graduates enter private practice, distributing themselves into small animal, large animal, mixed, and specialty practice categories in about the same proportions as graduates of other schools.

The fairness question is obviously more difficult to document. However, my personal observations have convinced me that our procedures are thorough, objective and fair. The Admissions Committee, chaired by Associate Dean Joseph Skelley, is composed of eight elected members of the faculty, four veterinary student representatives and an alumni member who is appointed by me every two years. On matters of policy and procedures all members have a vote; on the final decision about a candidate, only the faculty and the alumni member vote. Dr. Victor Menghetti (V'45) is now serving as the alumni member.

The Committee begins its monumental task each year with a highly accurate computerized data base which ranks students according to their grade point averages; the printout also provides Graduate Record Examination scores, information on colleges attended, etc. On the basis of these data as well as letters of recommendation, the Committee invites several hundred applicants for interviews. Soon after a candidate is interviewed by two Committee members his/her credentials are discussed by the entire Committee. This is followed by a vote to admit, to reject, or to place on "hold" for further consideration. Altogether, it is a task of staggering proportions and it leaves Committee members emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

If there is a better, fairer, or happier way to select a class we are unaware of it.