A well-rounded career

An interview with Rick Huneke, DVM, MPH, Executive Director, University Laboratory Animal Resources, Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA.

Dr. Huneke discusses the relevance of public health to lab animal science and shares advice for those seeking careers in the lab animal field.

How did your first job as a private practice veterinarian influence your decision to pursue a career in laboratory animal medicine?

In my first job, I spent 5 years practicing veterinary medicine at two small animal clinics in Baltimore. During that time I also met my future wife, a veterinary technician who later did research at Johns Hopkins University. She introduced me to the lab animal field and a few lab animal veterinarians. They convinced me to apply to the post-doctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins, which was one of the best decisions I have made in my life. Still, I am very thankful for my time in private practice; I benefited greatly from the exposure to clinical cases and surgeries and learned to think quickly on my feet. I encourage young veterinarians to spend some time in private practice before specializing in lab animal medicine.

You also hold a Master's degree in Public Health. How has this degree been useful to you in your career?

Public health practice and laboratory animal practice are very similar. In both fields, the goal is to maintain healthy populations and design systems to prevent, rather than to treat, disease. Epidemiology teaches you techniques for investigating a disease outbreak in order to determine the source and method of dissemination, decreasing the spread of the disease and, ultimately, preventing the outbreak from reoccurring. During my education in public health, I focused on immunology and infectious disease, particularly zoonoses. This expertise has been useful when working with exotic or wild-caught species such as nonhuman primates and prairie dogs. The focus on infectious disease also helped me to obtain a faculty appointment as Associate Professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at Drexel.

In your experience, how do lab animal programs differ in academic institutions versus private research settings?

Because I worked at a drug discovery location at DuPont, the research and the veterinary medicine I was practicing there and in academia were similar. The cultural differences, however, were huge. At that time, the salary, benefits and perks in industry were much higher than those in academia (though the gap has narrowed considerably in the past 10 years). But I discovered that along with the increase in benefits came a similar increase in stress. The pace of industry is much faster. Goals could change dramatically from one day to the next, and a program or area of concentration could be abandoned, discarding years of research. There were also nearly constant rumors of shutdowns, mergers and buyouts. While my experience in the pharmaceutical industry has been useful for performing AAALAC site visits and for interacting with colleagues in the industry, I doubt that I will ever return.

You coordinated the planning and construction of a new animal facility at Drexel. Tell us about its advantages for your research animals.

We were awarded an NIH animal facility improvement grant to build an addition to one of our animal facilities and renovate the current space. I believe it is vital for the NIH to continue to provide funding to facilities that support biomedical research. The project included a much-needed quarantine facility to house transgenic rodents imported from noncommercial sources. We also added a five-room behavioral suite, to support our neurobiology group, and a dedicated rodent survival surgery suite. Providing such spaces for investigators to conduct much of their research within the animal facility, rather than bringing the animals to their laboratories, allows greater oversight from my staff and helps to prevent the introduction of adventitious diseases to the rodent colonies.

As Associate Director of both the Master of Laboratory Animal Sciences and Veterinary Medical Science programs at Drexel, what do you think is the most important thing that someone interested in becoming a laboratory animal veterinarian should know?

Wow, that's a tough one. There are so many things I can suggest: find great mentors, network, spend time with your researchers and volunteer with professional groups. But I think the most important thing to learn and remember is that those of us in this field practice laboratory animal medicine because we love animals. Keeping our 'patients' healthy, enriched and distress-free allows our investigators to produce the best research results possible. And finally, I encourage lab animal veterinarians to be proud of what you do; don't be afraid to tell your family, friends and the public about the great things being done in the laboratory animal field.