



What's in a title?

In a message last fall on the COMPMED listserv, it was announced that the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America had begun a campaign to unify all veterinary technicians under a single name or title. Their objective was to recognize and standardize the diversity of titles—Registered Veterinary Technician, Certified Veterinary Technician, Licensed Veterinary Technician, Licensed Veterinary Medical Technician and Animal Health Technician—to the title of Registered Veterinary Nurse. This announcement stirred up some controversy in the field of laboratory animal science.

I teach veterinary technicians about laboratory animal science as part of a four-year curriculum by which they earn the title of Registered Veterinary Technologist on their California licenses alongside the title of Bachelor of Science in Animal Health Science. We use the phrases ‘veterinary nursing’ and ‘animal technician’ to describe their training and professional roles. Seldom do I use the term ‘veterinary nurse’—it simply doesn’t come up—so I hadn’t appreciated how passionate some people might be about their titles. It is, in fact, a topic that is worth exploring.

In some employment sectors, a technician is believed to be not an ‘educated professional’, but rather one who simply performs tasks. I must protest this understanding, for in laboratory animal science we know this not to be true. Perhaps in a similar sentiment, veterinary technicians have decided that the question of ‘what’s in a title’ merits their campaign.

One fundamental point in the online discussion was that titles inform others about what a veterinary technician does. Some participants in the discussion emphasized that laypeople seem not to understand the title of ‘veterinary technician’. Some in the discussion considered clarifying a technician’s role by including within technicians’ titles some

of their many job duties, such as laboratory technician, nurse, x-ray technician, phlebotomist, surgical nurse, anesthetist, rounds nurse, dietician, trainer, or surgeon. This seems complicated, upon consideration, and these titles sound similar to those of nurses in human medicine. Some suggested the title of ‘animal nurse practitioner’ as a more inclusive option.

Many in the discussion recognized that the term ‘nurse’ connotes a certain level of professionalism and importantly, specific education beyond a vocational or technical level. Some further noted that human nurses tend to concentrate in particular specialties, whereas a veterinary technician or veterinary nurse often combines many specializations and skillsets in one professional role. Merriam-Webster does define a technician as someone who is skilled in the technique of an art or craft, and a nurse as a person who is formally educated and trained in the care of the sick and infirmed. So by definition there is indeed a distinction that can be appreciated.

While reading the online exchange, I recalled one of the defining moments of my professional life. In the days when I worked at the bench as a chemistry technician, running assays in a nutrition lab at Virginia Tech, I was introduced to a professor of animal science. Answering his questions about what I did, I responded that “I’m just a technician in the lab.” Immediately, he fired off a five-minute lecture about the word ‘just’ and that my job was more important than just being ‘just’. To this day, I recite that lesson with my students to emphasize that their role in animal care is more than ‘just’ anything!

It should come as no surprise that now, as an educator, I contemplate what all the letters that follow our names—our titles—mean. Academic institutions grant associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. Credentialing and licensing entities offer licenses, certifications, diplomate statuses

and other familiar recognitions in the field of laboratory animal science. Other countries have their own designations, such as the Registered Master Laboratory Animal Technician in Canada and the Fellow of the Institute of Animal Technology in the UK. Indeed, a plethora of titles are used to recognize our training, and by these titles we communicate our specializations and abilities to others. At the other end of the acronym spectrum, I have met and worked with some incredible people in animal facilities who did not have a formal academic degree. Some would call their knowledge ‘street-learned’, having been taught hands-on by practical experience. It takes all kinds of training to engage in laboratory animal science.

So, what’s in a title? Does it come down to semantics? Are we obliged to explain ourselves? In some cases the answer is yes, and we need to inform others about ourselves and our roles. In this world of 30-second sound bites, oftentimes it is only one line on a sheet of paper or one short conversation in the elevator that allows us to quickly communicate who and what we are. But, of course, each of us is more than just a brief message. As many voiced in the online discussion, our intent should be to educate others about what our jobs and titles represent together. Laboratory animal science is a rich field that allows talented veterinary technicians and nurses to apply and demonstrate all that they have learned. Whether they are titled ‘technician’ or ‘nurse’, let the rest of the veterinary medicine community and the general public find out about their education and important contributions. A change like that proposed by the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America will take some time to become commonplace and be understood in our community; but importantly, this change is a matter of recognizing what each of us knows and does in our professional roles.