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Blending business and research in avian medicine



Dr. Stephen B. Hitchner

A person's career is frequently determined by the influence of individuals and fortuitous events. My entry into veterinary medicine was prompted by one individual, and my subsequent career was interspersed with good fortune along the way to make years of gratifying experiences.

Unlike many who go into veterinary medicine, I had no early inclination to join the profession, even though I was farm reared and had plenty of contact with animals. At Rutgers University, my major was dairy husbandry, with no thought of pursuing veterinary medicine. Like so many aggies who went to college during the Depression, I performed numerous jobs to earn an education. One of the activities that I engaged in during my junior year was part-time employment in the laboratory of Dr. F. R. Beaudette. Dr. Beaudette was recognized internationally as an authority on avian diseases, so even though my work around the laboratory was doing menial tasks, it was a rare experience to be able to associate with and observe the work of such an individual. It was through this association that by the middle of my senior year the decision was made to go on to veterinary college. Two other classmates, John Lippincott and James Osen, were interested in pursuing veterinary medicine, and Dr. Beaudette was confident he could get us accepted in veterinary school at his alma mater, Kansas State. However, after our applications were reviewed, word came back that Kansas was not accepting out-of-state students. Applications were then made to Iowa and Colorado, with the same response. By this time it was mid-July and prospects for entering veterinary medicine in the fall were very dim. As a last resort, Dr. Beaudette loaded the 3 of us into his car and drove us to Philadelphia for an interview with Dean Dick at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. I don't remember filling out applications, but I presume we did. Shortly thereafter, all 3 of us received notice that we had been accepted for the fall class. Knowing the right individual launched the 3 of us on our careers in veterinary medicine.

Military service interrupts studies

Pearl Harbor occurred during our second year of study. In June 1942, as students, we were given temporary appointments as second lieutenants in the US Army and were permitted to continue our education in an accelerated program until graduation. Shortly thereafter, I received an appointment to first lieutenant, followed by orders to appear at Carlisle Barracks, Pa for 6 weeks of basic training. I then spent 3 years in the service, with the bulk of it being on assignment with the Pam American Sanitary Bureau along with COL John Kintner and Major William Bentham. Our commission was to make a study of animal diseases along the Pan American Highway

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through Mexico and Central America. Fortunately our tour of duty was prior to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Mexico.

Family priorities influence employment

Upon termination of Army service, my thoughts turned to career possibilities. As a result of my association with Dr. Beaudette, I had decided to pursue the field of avian pathology.

In 1946, the University of Illinois was assembling staff for their new College of Veterinary Medicine and Dr. Robert Graham offered me a position as instructor in avian medicine. I accepted and moved to Urbana, leaving my wife and young son to live with her parents in New Jersey until I found accommodations in Illinois. Immediately after the war, housing was very scarce and the University was in the process of converting Army barracks into apartments. I was promised one of these apartments, but after living a bachelor's existence for 3 months, and no prospects of an apartment forthcoming, I received an offer from Dr. E. P. Johnson at the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), to be an associate professor with a sizeable increase in salary. What clinched my decision to accept the offer was the assurance that an apartment was available for my family.

In 1947, my career was launched at VPI with the discovery of the B-1 strain of Newcastle disease virus for the vaccination of poultry. The report of this finding, titled "Serendipity in science—discovery of the B-1 strain of Newcastle disease virus," was published in *Avian Diseases* 1975;19(2):215–223.

The recognition resulting from this discovery opened the door to many opportunities during my career. After two and a half years at VPI, I accepted an offer as full professor in the Department of Veterinary Science at the University of Massachusetts. I spent 4 years in research on avian diseases, after which an offer came to continue research with a commercial poultry vaccine company, American Scientific Laboratories (ASL) in Madison, Wis.

Interaction of scientists benefit research

At ASL I was given the opportunity to do full-time research on avian diseases and vaccine development. At that time anyone in academia who went to work for a commercial company was looked on as selling his soul to the devil. As a consequence, like others in commercial enterprises, I was excluded from attending some scientific meetings that were conducted primarily by academic professionals. Fortunately, that attitude gradually changed, and eventually veterinarians working for commercial companies were invited to attend meetings and were accepted as members. Perhaps Dr. C. A. Bottorff, who worked for American Cyanamid (Lederle Laboratories), did much to break down that barrier through his Bear Mountain Conferences. These all-expense paid meetings were sponsored by American Cyanamid to help poultry pathologists who were employees of state or university diagnostic laboratories keep abreast of the latest research developments. Over time, attitudes changed on the interaction of scientists from academic institutions with those of commercial companies. Cooperation between these 2 groups is now routine and is mutually beneficial.

I never regretted my having served with the commercial sector. I felt I had been exonerated by my colleagues for going commercial when, in 1960, I was elected president of the recently formed organization, American Association of Avian Pathologists. There was a certain satisfaction in working with the grass roots of the poultry industry, seeing their needs, and working toward providing solutions. While at ASL we made a few improvements in poultry vaccines and stimulated the competition. We were the first company

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to develop poultry flocks free of *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* as a source of eggs for vaccine production. This was the forerunner of the demand for specific-pathogen-free eggs in the production of live virus vaccines.

Becoming an entrepreneur

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When launching a career, one never knows what doors of opportunity may open along the way. It pays to be flexible and not overlook openings that may be presented. After 7 years with ASL, I was approached by Donald Lynch and Elbridge Murray, the largest distributors of ASL vaccines, who invited me to join them in the formation of a poultry vaccine production laboratory. After considerable deliberation and the enlistment of the expertise of 2 colleagues at ASL, George Appleton and Dr. R. W. Winterfield, we joined with Lynch and Murray to form L&M Laboratories in Berlin, Md. The fact that, shortly before, Schering had acquired ASL made abandoning the family-run organization much easier.

Developing a new enterprise, although risky, was a stimulating experience. We developed a line of poultry vaccines that performed well and were competitive with vaccines produced by long-established companies. After 4 years of production, acquisition-minded companies such as Pfizer, Ciba-Geigy, and Abbott Laboratories began exploring our potential, and a deal was finally consummated for the sale of our accumulated assets to Abbott Laboratories. As a boy, I recall that when my mother wished for something that was beyond our means she would say we would get that when her ship came in. The sale of the laboratory amounted to my ship coming in and, although it was not laden with as much wealth as most of the circulated rumors would indicate, it did aid in the education of 5 children and assure financial independence.

Being a cog in a large corporation does not engender the same motivation as being a part of a small, growing organization. Why the management of Abbott Laboratories decided to break up a winning combination was incomprehensible to me, but within a year, the 3 of us who comprised the scientific arm of the organization were transferred to Abbott headquarters in North Chicago and assigned different duties.

Returning to the academic setting

Before a year was up, I was visited by Dr. George Poppensiek, dean of the Veterinary School at Cornell, who offered me a tenured professorship as chairman of the Department of Avian Diseases. A year earlier Dr. P. P. Levine had approached me about the same position and, in fact, I went to Cornell for an interview. Although I was not enamored with administrative duties, returning to an academic institution did have appeal. However, when I considered that a 15% cut in salary would be required I rejected the offer at that time. Dean Poppensiek sweetened the pot considerably, so on July 1, 1966, I made the move to Ithaca, NY.

As indicated earlier, being an administrator was not my first choice of occupation. Like so many others, I was elevated to a position for which I had no training or previous preparation. Fortunately, the department was staffed with competent individuals, Drs. Philip Levine, Bruce Calnek, Julius Fabricant, and Malcolm Peckham, who needed little direction. My philosophy was to see that they were provided with the materials and an atmosphere conducive for them to exercise their potential. They did this without much help from me. One of the gratifications of this experience was the contact with numerous graduate students, many of whom came from foreign countries.

Included in the department's purview were 3 poultry diagnos-

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tic laboratories dispersed throughout New York: one at East Aurora directed by Dr. Saul Narotsky, one at Oneonta directed by Dr. Jean Hagan, and one at Kingston directed by Dr. Clement Angstrom. These laboratories provided a much needed service to the poultry industry in earlier years, but they became so effective that during my administration the case load became so low that during a budget crunch the laboratories in East Aurora and Oneonta were discontinued. Closing these laboratories was one of the most disagreeable actions of my administrative duties.

Another purview of the department was the disease research activities of the Duck Research Laboratory on Long Island. On my arrival, the laboratory was directed by Dr. William Urban, and the diagnostic facilities were capably handled by Dr. Louis Leibovitz. Dr. Leibovitz's interests were far reaching, and being located close to the sea he became involved in the diseases of marine animals. Early in the 1970s, fish culture became a popular topic and, in order to succeed, disease control needed to be an integral part of management. The training of the veterinarian is such that he or she seemed to be the logical person to fill that need. Since poultry pathologists were accustomed to dealing with disease control in large populations and we had a person with an interest in diseases of aquatic animals, the department put in a bid for that activity to be incorporated in its program. Consequently, the Department of Avian Diseases at Cornell became the Department of Avian and Aquatic Animal Medicine, and Dr. Leibovitz spearheaded the work in aquatic medicine.

Teaching avian diseases to veterinary students became my responsibility after Dr. Levine's retirement. As in most institutions, the subject of avian diseases was confined almost entirely to diseases of domestic poultry. Very few veterinary students had an interest in this subject, and in order to give the course wider application to the avian field, people with expertise in pet bird medicine were invited to participate in the lectures. Cooperative arrangements with the small animal clinic were also developed to stimulate interest in this phase of veterinary medicine.

A decision to concentrate on avian research

After 10 years as department chairman, I followed my conviction that 10 years as head was long enough to impart one's ideas and influence. It was time to pass the baton to another. Consequently, I stepped down as chairman but stayed in the department for four and a half years, continuing teaching and research. With the realization that little effort had been applied to research on diseases of pet birds, my research was directed in this area, with the main focus on canary pox and Pachecho's herpesvirus. This was timely, for it coincided with the expanding interest of practicing veterinarians in pet bird medicine. The rapid growth in membership of the Association of Avian Veterinarians, came about as a consequence of the increased value of pet birds attributable to the restrictions on importation following the 1971-1972 Newcastle outbreak in California.

Retirement brings opportunities for travel

When I qualified for retirement, I took advantage of that opportunity, not that I didn't enjoy my work, but for the realization that there were a number of other things I would like to do while time and health permitted. Following my policy that the old guard should not hang around after retirement and harass a successor, we moved to Maryland, where winters were not so long and disagreeable. Retirement did not mean that I had totally abandoned professional activities—only that I could pick and choose those that had particular appeal and pursue them at a more leisurely pace. As a re-

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sult, my time has been occupied by filling in at a diagnostic laboratory, lecturing on poultry disease control, and consulting. In addition, professional activities have afforded me the privilege of travel to Romania, Columbia, Mexico, Guatemala, Israel, Australia, and Egypt; to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong on a People to People tour; and to the Peoples' Republic of China on a US Exchanges tour. My most gratifying experiences were recent volunteer assignments: two trips to Cochabamba, Bolivia, sponsored by Volunteers for Overseas Cooperative Assistance (VOCA), and a trip to Lima, Peru, sponsored by the International Executive Service Corps.

Who would believe that when I graduated from high school my goal in life was to be a farmer! Fortunately, after 2 years of farming, I became disillusioned with that prospect and went on to college. With thanks to Dr. Beaudette for directing me into veterinary medicine, I have had no regrets about the career I chose. It would be difficult to find a profession that offered a greater diversity of opportunity than veterinary medicine.

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Dr. Hitchner retired in 1981 as emeritus professor from the New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University. He enjoys gardening, beekeeping, and participating in avian related activities.

For this feature, the editor welcomes contributions from veterinarians who have retired or are about to retire.