



Short Communication:
Teaching and Learning Matters

Development of an elective course in veterinary medicine with focus in communication

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Abstract

Background: Veterinary medicine and pet care are increasingly common topics encountered in community pharmacy practice. However, current pharmacy curricula include limited didactic training on the safety and efficacy of medicine in veterinary practice. Our goal was to design and implement a new veterinary medicine and pet care elective course for second-year doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) students in a three-year accelerated program.

Educational activity: Faculty provided didactic lectures and hands-on practice related to various areas of veterinary medicine. Students were assessed on communication skills, including their ability to respond to inquiries typically encountered in the community setting, and were required to develop and present educational posters to grade-school students about pet issues. They were also assessed on appropriate use of references and resources throughout the course. A cumulative final exam covered all didactic topics. This elective course in practical veterinary medicine and pet care was viewed positively by students based on standard course evaluation results. Students appreciated the focus on an area of community practice that is not currently a major part of the curriculum.

Critical analysis: This veterinary medicine elective course was evaluated highly by students. It provided useful information related to care of animals and pets, as well as practice and training for patient communication. Students offered productive feedback to enhance the course in the future.

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Background

Community pharmacists are commonly faced with issues related to veterinary medicine, including dispensing insulin for family pets, human patients' toxic exposures to animal medications, or animals consuming medications at human doses. Pharmacists have traditionally received limited

didactic training in managing these situations when they occur, which could involve simple consultation or referral to a veterinarian or poison control center.¹ A recent report citing data from 57 of 123 (46.3%) colleges and schools of pharmacy noted that only 22 schools (39% of those responding) offered at least one elective course in the veterinary medicine category, including veterinary pharmacy, veterinary therapeutics, and/or veterinary pharmacotherapy.²

In the near future, community pharmacists could be confronted with a new wave of animal medication prescriptions with current and future updates to state and federal law. The Fairness to Pet Owners Act (House

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Resolution 1406), originally proposed in 2011, requires veterinarians to provide a written prescription for medications ordered or prescribed for animals under their care and a written disclosure that prescriptions may be filled at any pharmacy pursuant to state law.³ This bill, modeled after similar legislation in 2003 regarding contact lens sales from eye doctors, if passed and signed into law could potentially open up many more avenues of community pharmacy involvement in the care of animals and pets. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), 17 states have passed specific laws, regulations, or rules related to prescriptions and medication orders from veterinarians, several of which require the same disclosure and provision of written prescriptions that the federal law proposes.⁴

Pharmacy educators have a responsibility to provide a well-rounded, robust curriculum for student pharmacists that will best prepare them for their chosen section of practice. Elective courses provide an excellent opportunity to offer a wide variety of learning opportunities to students. Standard 10 of the most recent Accreditation Council on Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards for the programs leading to the Doctor of Pharmacy degree mandates the "... availability of sufficient elective courses (within or outside the college or school) and pharmacy practice experiences to allow students to pursue special interests."⁵ Additionally, subdomain 3.6 of the 2013 Center for the Advancement of Pharmacy Education (CAPE) 2013 Educational Outcomes focuses on communication, with particular focus on training students to ask open-ended questions and using interpersonal skills to establish rapport and build trusting relationships.⁶

At our institution, students have an opportunity to take elective courses in three of the four quarters of the year, with the fourth quarter reserved for a research-driven independent study course. Currently, we offer 21 different elective courses, of which students are required to take five over the course of their professional program. Elective course topics include aromatherapy, leadership development, wilderness medicine, and mental health among others. Given the increasing and wide-ranging role envisioned for veterinary medicine in pharmacy practice and the importance of communication in pharmacy education, we sought to design an elective course that would combine the development of communication skills vital for community practice with the practical knowledge and drug information skills needed to appropriately respond to common veterinary issues. The objective of this article is to describe the development and design of this elective course in practical veterinary medicine and evaluate its impact on students.

Educational activity

Course design

Sullivan University College of Pharmacy (an accelerated three-year program) began offering a two-credit-hour once-

Table 1
Student learning objectives for veterinary medicine elective

By the end of this course students should be able to carry out the following:

1. Explain basic veterinary physiology, pharmacology, and medicinal chemistry.
2. Differentiate among various pet types as related to basic veterinary patient assessment.
3. Apply knowledge of pharmacology and medicinal chemistry to veterinary uses of medications.
4. Properly use references/resources in veterinary medicine and pharmacy to accurately answer patient questions.
5. Comfortably and confidently respond to veterinary issues and concerns in the community setting.

weekly Veterinary Medicine elective course in the summer quarter to second-professional-year doctor of pharmacy students. This placement in the curriculum is concurrent with the start of the pharmacology/medicinal chemistry and pharmacotherapeutics course sequences. The summer quarter was chosen as it was after the community practice-focused courses such as Self-Care and Pharmacy Communications during the first professional year and immediately following the students' introductory pharmacy practice experiences (IPPEs) in the curriculum. The course was designed (Table 1) to provide useful information and resources for pharmacists in the community setting encountering common pet issues as well as teach and reinforce concepts of resource gathering, evaluation of information sources, and communication with patients.

In terms of faculty time and resources, this course involved two coordinators, both full-time faculty (one clinical and one experiential in focus area). Along with coordinators, as described later in this article, faculty were solicited on a first-come, first-served basis to teach the various topics in the course. These teaching hours were incorporated into the respective faculty member's workload for the year. Each faculty member was also asked to submit ten exam questions assessing their material for incorporation into the final exam. Faculty members were not expected to be experts in the subject matter prior to teaching, as the purpose of the course was to provide a very general overview from a community perspective of animal health and patient care rather than an in-depth specialist-type education. As might be expected, however, faculty members who owned or had experience caring for each type of animal (and subsequent strong interest in them) were the first to volunteer to teach.

Course material and topics

Topics for the course (Table 2) included a basic review of animal-related pharmacology, an overview of relevant medicinal chemistry, as well as therapeutic topics related to dogs, cats, farm animals (horses/cows), reptiles and fish, and small animals (e.g., hamsters and gerbils). Lectures

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