

2009 Theriogenologist of the Year

Ramblings of an itinerant theriogenologist

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Introduction

The invitation to prepare a written composition for this award creates a novel opportunity for a ‘bully pulpit’ from which to share my story. In that regard, I have chosen to briefly review my background, education, and activities, and as well to share the philosophical principles on which I operate.

It is an incredible honor and privilege to be designated as Theriogenologist of the Year! I am profoundly grateful to the selection committee, and to my colleagues who nominated and supported me. Furthermore, I am deeply indebted to all those who have helped me in ways big and small; it is no exaggeration to say that I accept this award on behalf of numerous persons who have been part of my world.

Early years and family

Life is a journey; what an incredible ride it has been for me! I had a very humble start on a small dairy farm near Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I am the youngest of four children and am eternally grateful to my parents, John and Marge Kastelic, who taught me the value of hard work, honesty, and the pursuit of excellence. Although neither of my parents had the opportunity to complete high school, they have incredible wisdom and life experience. They strongly believed in the value of a good education, and they take enormous pride in the accomplishments of their children, grandchildren, and great-

grandchildren. Furthermore, as they approach their 65th wedding anniversary, they are incredible role models of fidelity and long-term commitment.

My wife Rose and I have six children. Angela is a nurse, currently working on a Master's degree and Nurse Practitioner certification. Rachel has training as a child care worker, is married, and lives in New Zealand. Our next three sons are professional musicians; all are classically trained violinists. John 'migrated' to the viola, and is majoring in music theory and composition. Tony also switched to the viola and is majoring in viola performance and music theory. Gabe continues to play violin and will start his post-secondary studies in the fall. David is still in high school and is interested in the outdoors and farming. Rose chose to stay home to raise our children, and for sixteen years, has supervised the education of our children, including home schooling and cyberschooling (computer-based schooling). As the demands on Rose's time for educating our children have diminished, she is now pursuing a long-term goal of learning to play cello and will attend university part-time to pursue language studies.

As a teenager, I recall reading the advice that "If you prepare yourself appropriately, your way in the world will become very clear to you." Although I initially lacked the wisdom to understand the implications of that statement, I never forgot it. I certainly never imagined the opportunities and experiences that have come my way. I keep 'morphing' into the next phase of my life, from a student, to a veterinarian, scientist, editor, and writing consultant. Remarkably, my previous experiences prepare me for the next phase. I am unsure what lies ahead, except that I am incredibly excited, as I have every anticipation that 'the best is yet to come.'

Education

I became a veterinarian (University of Saskatchewan, 1982) and spent two years in private veterinary practice (primarily cattle). I was interested in specializing in dairy practice and I assured my wife that I would return to my alma mater to ‘spend a couple of years and then get a real job again.’ That plan was soon abandoned when I recognized that I needed training to the PhD level for long-term opportunities and job security. When I mentioned this to Prof. Reuben Mapletoft, he suggested that I go to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My first reaction was to dismiss this as sheer folly, but the next day, with my wife’s blessings and Reuben’s help, I was on the phone with Prof. O.J. Ginther. I was soon accepted into his laboratory, and arrived in Madison in late June, 1985. In collaboration with Gregg Adams (we were classmates in both veterinary and graduate school), I worked on mares for one breeding season, but thereafter worked exclusively on cattle. The training I received at Madison has created life-long opportunities. In 1990, I completed my studies and started working as a Research Scientist for the Canadian federal department of agriculture (similar to USDA).

Professional activities

I passed the qualifying examination of the ACT in 1994; there were seven successful candidates that year, though I was the only one with a Y chromosome! I am enormously grateful to be a member of the ACT. Although my background and ongoing activities and contributions are different than most other diplomates, this is a very diverse group, and I have always felt very well accepted.

An invitation to present a lecture on ultrasonography in cattle at the Brazilian Embryo Transfer Society in 1995 was followed by a ten-month sabbatical (with my

family) to Brazil in 1997, and subsequently several other visits to South America. I have also been able to make several trips to Europe, primarily Hungary. In 2007, I was deeply honoured to receive a Professor of Honorary Cause from the Faculty of Veterinary Science, Szent István University, Budapest, Hungary. Remarkably, this institution started in 1787, making it one of the oldest veterinary schools in the world.

From 2001 to 2008, I served on the ACT examination committee. This was an incredible experience, which has fostered cherished friendships. Furthermore, at breakfast during an exam planning meeting in Nashville, I casually mentioned to Mats Troedsson that ‘being Editor of *Theriogenology* would be my dream job’; this ultimately resulted in a gracious invitation from the late Vic Shille to serve as his replacement. I travelled to Gainesville in early January 2003, and spent a few days with Vic as I assumed the position of Co-Editor-in-Chief. In this capacity, I get manuscripts from much of the planet (except Europe and Africa; those are handled by my colleague Co-Editor-in-Chief, Prof. Fulvio Gandolfi, in Milan, Italy). At present, my duties include receiving an average of six submitted manuscripts each week, deciding which ones will be sent to review, finding reviewers, interacting with reviewers and authors, and making decisions regarding the suitability of manuscripts for publication. I also do final edits on an average of at least three papers each week, including submitted manuscripts which I accepted, and proceedings papers which were guided through the review and revision by a guest editor.

From 2005-2008, the proceedings of the annual SFT conference were published in *Theriogenology*. For each of those four years, I had personal responsibility to do the final edits on the proceedings articles prior to publication. I really appreciated the efforts of the authors, reviewers, and guest editors for their involvement in this process. In addition, I

was profoundly grateful for the many compliments that I received from members of the Society and College regarding the professionalism and high standard that was established with publication of these proceedings in the journal. I have every confidence that this will continue, now that the proceedings will be published under the auspices of the new journal being launched by the Society.

Science and scientific writing

My journal appointment provides experience, credibility, and funds to support my other passion; giving lectures and workshops on science and science writing, primarily to those for whom English is not their first language. We expect scientists to conduct and communicate science, but few graduate programs have formal training in scientific writing; I was profoundly lucky to be mentored by Prof. Ginther, an incredibly skilled and prolific writer. Furthermore, to get international recognition, it's almost mandatory to publish in English. Writing in your native language is difficult, whereas writing in a non-native language is profoundly challenging. Remarkably, despite the great need for training in scientific writing, especially for those for whom English is not their native language, there is a paucity of assistance available.

I have a substantial publication record (author or co-author of >100 peer-reviewed papers and >200 abstracts, proceedings, reports, etc.), but I have always felt that I am a better editor than a writer. I gave my first presentation on scientific writing at the veterinary school in Botucatu, SP, Brazil in 1997, followed by a presentation in Budapest in 2004. I have subsequently given presentations on scientific writing in these two countries, as well as seven others, in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. On several occasions, I have done these in collaboration with my wife Rose. Although

English is her native language, Rose spoke primarily German before she attended school, has an undergraduate degree in French, spent one year attending university in France, and also has a Masters in Political Science. When we do writing workshops together, Rose covers the principles of writing in English, including sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, paraphrasing, and preparing outlines, whereas I cover the principles of conducting science and preparing manuscripts. We genuinely enjoy travelling and working together; most of the time, we are able to include some sightseeing into our trips.

Philosophy

My formal training is in veterinary medicine and reproductive biology, with only a few humanities options, and certainly no formal training in philosophy. In the paragraphs that follow, I have summarized some of my basic philosophies and guiding principles. It is noteworthy that these notes are derived in part from a brief presentation on ethics and philosophy that I usually include in a scientific writing workshop (when time permits). The primary purpose of sharing these ideas is not so that they are universally accepted and adopted, but rather to challenge others to contemplate these issues and formulate their own approaches.

Education, knowledge, and wisdom

Although education, knowledge and wisdom are clearly related, I view them as distinctly different. Veterinarians spend many years in school, learning a myriad of facts. Whereas knowledge is specific information, I really like the definition that education is what you remember after you have forgotten the details. Furthermore, I regard wisdom as the ability to apply knowledge. We all know many persons that are highly educated, but

lack wisdom. Conversely, there are many persons with a paucity of formal education that are extremely wise and have much to contribute.

The people factor

Although much of veterinary medicine is focussed on work with animals, most veterinarians spend considerable time interacting with people. Consequently, personal rapport and communication skills are very important, both for oral, as well as written communications. Although clinicians and scientists historically often worked as independent professionals, it is becoming much more common to collaborate with others. For a successful collaboration, communication is critically important, along with a clear understanding of responsibilities, expectations, and benefits. In general, long-term collaborations are usually successful ONLY if all persons involved contribute and derive a tangible benefit.

Personal vision

Although most companies and organizations have a mission statement, in many cases, it's debatable whether this mission statement has relevance in day-to-day activities. Regardless, I strongly encourage everyone to develop a personal mission statement, and to use it to guide your activities and decisions. My own mission statement is the essence of simplicity; my mission is to help people. Thus, I spend much of my day interacting directly with family, colleagues, coworkers, students, and members of society, and indirectly with people from around the world.

I recall the late Otto Radostits saying that if you want to get something done, you ask the busiest person that you know; they will usually agree to help, and will usually do

so. Conversely, the person who has truly little to do will typically give you an extended litany regarding how busy they are, and they are highly unlikely to assist you.

It's critically important to establish goals; everyone should have short-, medium- and long-term goals. These goals should cover a broad range, from short-term practical ones, to others which are fanciful. Regardless of the nature of the goal, in the absence of a plan to achieve it, you have a fantasy, and not a dream. Furthermore, it is wise to be careful what you wish for, as it may come to pass!

Problem solving

Numerous times each day, all of us encounter problems, challenges, and requests for assistance. Although it's easy to feel completely overwhelmed, the key is to keep things in perspective. To cope with these demands, I employ a two-step approach. I first determine if this is something that I can address. Although there are many things that I dislike or disagree with, by recognizing that I have no ability to change them, I put them aside, and avoid considerable personal angst and frustration. For things that I can address, on the basis of urgency, importance, and my own schedule, I determine an appropriate time frame for my response. Although this approach may seem simplistic, it has enabled me to face a seemingly overwhelming barrage, put aside that which I cannot influence or control, and develop a manageable schedule of response for things which I can affect.

It's mostly attitude

It's been said that your life is approximately 10% what happens to you and 90% how you respond to it. In that regard, happiness is mostly a choice; you will be as happy or unhappy as you choose to be! Bad things happen to good people on a daily basis, and life is frequently not fair. There is a well defined series of reactions in response to

tragedy; shock, disbelief, denial, anger, and eventually acceptance, the resolve to move ahead, and restoration of normalcy. There are two key issues regarding this series of reactions. Firstly, trying to avoid the steps, for example, trying to move ahead without grieving, are usually not successful. Secondly, although some events are so profound and tragic that you may never fully recover, prolonged angst and perpetually feeling that you are a victim can be very debilitating.

All of us know persons that are consistently upbeat and cheerful, often despite many challenges and difficulties. How do they do it? For myself, I make a conscious effort to adopt a positive outlook as my default mode. Furthermore, when confronted with adversity, I try to keep calm and maintain perspective; most things which initially seemed like mountains, are truly speed bumps when given sober second thought.

Dare to be different

It's been said that it takes 'different' people to make a difference. Furthermore, I recall one of my mentors telling me that "It's not conventional, but that never stopped us in the past!" Thus, I frequently take an unorthodox approach to many of my tasks and opportunities. Furthermore, I frequently encourage others to pursue novel approaches.

Professionalism

Veterinarians are highly trained medical personnel, with an expectation of being regarded by society as professional persons. As veterinary professionals, we are obligated to maintain a high level of knowledge and skill, and to provide services that are in the best interests of our patients and clients. However, in my view, professionalism is not merely conferred by accomplishment or education, but rather it is something that we earn in accordance with our conduct, including how we treat our patients, and arguably, more

importantly, how we treat others, including clients, staff, and colleagues. I firmly believe, that as professionals, we are held to a higher standard of conduct, in all aspects of our lives, both in our work and our personal lives. In that regard, unscrupulous behaviour in our personal conduct results in a substantial loss of credibility in our work.

Work-life balance

As the world becomes more interconnected and complicated, the overall pace of our lives seems to increase. Many working people have challenges maintaining a healthy work-life balance; veterinarians are no exception, and for many, emergency calls may make it even more difficult, particularly for those who have few or no associates who share emergency duty. Although there are many articles and pundits who claim that ‘you can do it all,’ in my view, that is not realistic. I firmly believe that everything has consequences, both good and bad. For example, a speaking engagement in a foreign country provides me an opportunity to help others, to meet new persons, and to see a new place. However, it also means time away from my responsibilities and activities, both personal and professional. Although communications make it possible to stay in contact, for many aspects, they are not a satisfactory substitute. Thus, it is critical to honestly consider the true ‘net benefit’ of any action or decision. Furthermore, it is foolhardy to endlessly postpone commitments or actions, as they may never happen. We all have to take personal responsibility for our own health and wellbeing, both mental and physical, including development of appropriate leisure activities. The consequences of failing to address these needs can be truly tragic.

21st century

The world has changed dramatically in the last few decades, and if anything, the pace of change is accelerating. In its current iteration, the world is an exciting, but complicated place! Communication and travel are ‘shrinking’ the world; we have unprecedented opportunities to share ideas, knowledge, and experience with others, both electronically, or within a few hours of travel, we can be virtually anywhere on the planet. Thus, there are literally endless possibilities for all of us, in particular for youth and young adults. Concurrently, the challenge is to carefully sift through all the ‘noise’ and ‘fluff’, and to capture the real ‘nuggets’, and ultimately make good choices and decisions, based on correct and reliable information.

In step with the rise of the ‘information age’, there has been an increased emphasis on marketing. I recall reading the liner notes on a music CD, where the artist acknowledged her ‘marketing team.’ Thus, her incredible commercial success was due not only to her substantial talent, but concurrently to a clever group of people with detailed knowledge of marketing. In my view, many other entities (not just musical groups, but the world in general) have very little apparent talent, substance or inherent value, yet they are incredible commercial successes, due primarily to the role of marketing. I think there is an important lesson here for all of us. We live in a highly competitive world and we need to learn to market ourselves, including our knowledge, skills, and our opportunity to provide a service, product, or somehow to add value. I recommend a two-step approach. First, identify your inherent skills, ability, and knowledge, and then work very hard to increase and improve those; to truly achieve to your potential. Secondly, market yourself, your skills, and abilities. We have all done

this; for example, we had to get good grades and experience to gain entry to veterinary school. As information becomes more readily available and the overall levels of competition continue to rise, we all need to pro-actively enhance our resumes, our knowledge, skill sets, and abilities, so that we can remain competitive. Furthermore, in my view, it's not necessary to put others down to gain a competitive advantage; we need to 'put ourselves up', through ongoing evaluation and renewal.

Conclusion

I reiterate my profound gratitude to the selection committee for choosing me to receive this award, to all of those who have helped me along the way, and especially to my family, who provide ongoing love, support, and indeed, a reason to live. It seems appropriate to end with a quote from Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."