

The Value of Veterinary Internships

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Veterinary internships are becoming more popular in many places in the world, especially within North America, and new graduates may wonder whether such programs represent the future of the profession. Internships are very common in human medicine, but need they become customary in veterinary medicine as well?

Internships refer to training programs that typically represent one year of additional training following graduation with a veterinary degree. Some veterinary schools strongly encourage their graduating students to pursue internships, and in some schools, a significant percentage of their students do.

There are many reasons why some senior veterinary students decide to apply to internship programs. For students who feel that their veterinary education or hands-on experience may need bolstering before they assume more complete personal responsibility for patient care, then internships can provide an important bridge to clinical competency through more clinical exposure, didactic training, and direct supervision. Also, while some clinics may not feel comfortable hiring a new graduate without experience, hiring someone who has completed an internship is often some assurance that the individual likely has pertinent clinical experience. For some new graduates, especially those who envision eventually pursuing residencies in specialty programs, internships have become almost a prerequisite.

Internships, however, do have their disadvantages. Many veterinary students have already been in school for most of their lives, and spending another year in training may not be welcomed by everyone. In addition, most interns traditionally receive a much lower rate of pay for that year of study, and tend to work more hours, compared to new graduates who start practicing immediately at a higher rate of pay and may have more favorable work schedules. The difference between what an intern gets paid and what a new graduate gets paid can be considered the “opportunity cost” for pursuing an internship, which can be substantial for this additional year of training, plus the extra time of full earning needed to be comparable to those who did not choose to do an internship. For those veterinary students who carry significant student debt, this makes one more year when the debt accrues. For those embarking on an internship because they want to go on and do a residency and eventually become a specialist, some might be disillusioned to learn that residency programs are very competitive, and completing an internship in no way guarantees that a residency space will be available.

Selecting an internship program can also be perplexing because no two programs are directly comparable, and while some guidelines exist, there are no governing bodies overseeing internship programs, and no guarantees that programs meet the needs of interns. In fact, some interns may enroll in programs because they don't feel entirely confident in their abilities to deliver care in clinical practice settings, only to find out that they are often thrust into more complicated situations, and sometimes without direct supervision.

There are obviously wonderful internship programs that provide onboarding, direct support and supervision, post-internship competency achievement, patient and teaching rounds, and structured training which can all be invaluable for new veterinary graduates, but there are also programs where interns serve as less expensive labor in inflexible schedules without all the requisite benefits, so whether or not an internship is a good decision depends on the individual and the program.

Whether a new graduate benefits most from pursuing an internship or going directly into practice, depends somewhat on the anticipated career path but mostly on the quality of the opportunity. While either scenario may involve some degree of chaos, most graduates who go directly into primary-care (first opinion) practice achieve the same relative level of clinical competence within a few years of graduation. For most graduates, the most important aspect of performing clinical duties comfortably, whether in a direct work setting or an internship is often supervision in terms of mentorship during that important first year following graduation.

Internships can provide standardized and supervised instruction for new graduates, and for those who envision pursuing residency programs - they can be critical. Potential interns should carefully scrutinize internship programs, since such programs can be costly in terms of deferred compensation, and may not provide the level of instruction envisioned. On the other hand, the transition from veterinary school to primary-care practice can occur relatively smoothly in practices committed to new graduate mentorship [1-6].

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