Honoring the role of the attending veterinarian

As we spend some time this anniversary year reflecting on AAALAC International’s first five decades, we are reminded of the vital role that laboratory animal veterinarians have played in the mission and growth of AAALAC. AAALAC exists because it was conceived and developed as a result of laboratory animal veterinarians identifying a problem. In the early 1950s, pioneering veterinarians from the Chicago area informally gathered together to discuss the challenges they were seeing in caring for animals being used in research. These informal discussions rapidly evolved into a national movement to address the issues arising in the growing field of laboratory animal science. As early iterations of what would eventually become AALAS (the American Association of Laboratory Animal Science) and AAALAC evolved, it was primarily veterinarians driving the conceptualization of an accreditation program for laboratory animal care.

It was during the same time that responsibility for the care of laboratory animals continued to shift from individual researchers to an institutional caretaker, and the role of the attending veterinarian began to emerge. In the 1970s this role was first officially defined in animal welfare regulations in the United States. In 1985 the U.S. Animal Welfare Act stated that the attending veterinarian “… has direct or delegated authority for activities involving animals at a facility …” but the role was still limited in many ways. It wasn’t until later editions of the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (the Guide) that the role of the attending veterinarian was expanded in scope and stature. The 2011 edition of the Guide says the “veterinary care program is the responsibility of the attending veterinarian,” including all issues related to animal welfare and well-being, and that the attending veterinarian will “provide guidance to investigators and all personnel involved in the care and use of animals” and “guidance and oversight to surgery programs and perioperative care involving animals.” Over the years, the role of the attending veterinarian also began to be defined and highlighted in regulations around the world.

Long before the regulations and guidelines spelled out the pivotal role of the laboratory animal veterinarian, AAALAC engaged veterinarians as leaders in its programs and processes. From the start,
AAALAC required that a veterinarian be part of every site visit team. Of the 12 people appointed to the very first Council on Accreditation created in 1965, 10 were veterinarians. And many of the same forward-thinking veterinarians who were instrumental in the development of AAALAC were also key players in the creation of ACLAM, the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine. ACLAM Diplomates have been essential to the leadership of AAALAC International—all but one (23 of 24) Council Presidents has been an ACLAM Diplomate.

The significance of laboratory animal veterinarians to AAALAC’s mission and growth is also evident in the makeup of the Board of Trustees. Founding Member Organizations represented on the Board included the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Animal Care Panel (now AALAS), and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. All three remain Member Organizations today and additional veterinary-focused organizations have joined them including: the American Association of Corporate and Public Practice Veterinarians; American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine; American College of Veterinary Pathologists; American Society of Laboratory Animal Practitioners; Asian Federation of Laboratory Animal Science Associations; Association of Primate Veterinarians; Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching-NZ; European College of Laboratory Animal Medicine; European Society of Laboratory Animal Veterinarians; Federation of European Laboratory Animal Science Associations; Japanese College of Laboratory Animal Medicine; and the Korean College of Laboratory Animal Medicine.

As the scope and variety of veterinary-related Member Organizations has expanded the AAALAC Board of Trustees over the years, the scope of veterinary specialties represented on the Council on Accreditation and among AAALAC’s ad hoc Consultants and Specialists has blossomed as well. Today Council members encompass a variety of clinical veterinary disciplines and areas of scientific expertise allowing AAALAC to tailor its site-visit teams to the precise needs of each institution it visits as part of the accreditation process.

The relationship AAALAC International has had with laboratory animal veterinarians is a synergistic one. While veterinarians have provided exceptional leadership, expertise and vision for AAALAC’s programs and growth, AAALAC has often provided a platform from which the voices of veterinarians could be better heard within their institutions—validating their concerns, requests for more resources, or the need for a more expanded management or leadership role within their institution to support their scientists and advance animal welfare. The 2011 version of the Guide incorporated significantly expanded roles and responsibilities for the attending veterinarian, prompting AAALAC to revise its
position statement on the crucial role of the attending veterinarian. AAALAC’s updated position statement notes that the attending veterinarian should have ample authority to make decisions, have clear and open lines of communication with the Institutional Official and IACUC/Ethics Committee/Oversight Body, receive adequate resources, provide guidance and oversight, and take on significant responsibilities related to the IACUC or equivalent body. This greatly augmented version of the position statement underscores AAALAC’s view that the attending veterinarian should be a leader and collaborator in all aspects of an institution’s animal care and use program.

The history of AAALAC International and the evolving role of the attending veterinarian are closely intertwined. We take time now to thank and honor these laboratory animal veterinarians for their work in creating higher health standards for animals, and improved research as a result. Moving forward, AAALAC International is committed to continue advancing and supporting the vital work they do for the betterment of both animals and science.