

UNDERUTILIZED AND UNDERAPPRECIATED

Become an ally of your practice's veterinary technicians.

BY WENDY HAUSER, DVM



Discussions around how to better utilize veterinary technicians have one common theme: how to help them work at the top of their credentials. While empowering them to do everything for which they were trained and are capable of is vital, it's only half of the story. The missing piece is how hospital leaders should be allies, cultivating awareness of the critical contributions of technicians as key team members.

According to a 2022 survey by the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America, among the 18 barriers to full veterinary technician utilization are:

- ▶ A lack of public understanding of the role of credentialed technicians.
- ▶ A lack of professional recognition and appreciation by veterinarians.
- ▶ A lack of title protection within individual hospitals.
- ▶ A lack of a clearly defined scope of practice.

istockphoto.com/PeopleImages

It Starts With Professional Identity

A professional identity is how veterinary technicians see themselves in the industry and workplace. It influences their behavior, ethics and interactions in professional groups, society and the practice. Their identity is upended when a veterinarian displays a lack of confidence in their skill set or prevents them from performing duties they're permitted to do. It's also disturbed when practices fail to clearly define the scope of practice between non-credentialed and credentialed technicians.

The development of a professional identity is rarely proactively managed in hospitals. For newly graduated veterinary technicians transitioning into practice, a lack of mentoring and workplace policies that fail to differentiate job tasks often undermine their professional identity. The technician's role is further devalued when job descriptions include menial, non-professional tasks such as janitorial work. Do you expect your veterinarians to clean the waiting room at the end of the day? Why should your other valued professionals do it?

Allying With Credentialed Technicians

A recent survey found that 47% of pet owners were unaware that credentialed veterinary technicians were trained professionals educated in delivering medical services. Sixty-three percent didn't understand that they are the equivalent of nurses in human health care. That is a prime example of how veterinary hospitals have failed to ally with their credentialed veterinary technicians.

According to one widely accepted definition, the traditional meaning of allyship refers to a group that "associates and cooperates with one another for a common cause or purpose." Being an ally for credentialed veterinary technicians requires three steps: speaking

QUOTABLE

The American Animal Hospital Association's *2023 Technician Utilization Guidelines* (bit.ly/3FAI3mR) say this about "moving the needle":

"Historically and across industries, the term 'technician' has carried a connotation of being less educated and limited in skill set. ... How, then, do we break this stigma? It's complicated, with no simple answers or a single solution. However, it begins with self-awareness and education in the veterinary profession and ultimately extends to clients and members of the general public."

up, challenging the status quo and creating opportunities.

1 Speaking Up

NAVTA's survey found a lack of public understanding about the role and function of credentialed technicians and a lack of professional recognition for them. Here are three ways that veterinary practices can educate clients about technicians.

First, post technicians' credentials on your practice's website. When I perform competitive market analyses for my client hospitals, I rarely see a website that differentiates and promotes their team members. Supporting a professional identity should include grouping team members by role and listing them by name and professional credentials, such as RVT, CVT, LVT, LVMT and VTS. Each section should explain the key responsibilities in animal medical care.

For example, you could describe roles like this:

- ▶ Credentialed veterinary technicians are graduates of two- or four-year professional training programs. They are taught to support veterinarians in a wide variety of ways, including surgery and anesthesia, radiology, dentistry, disease recognition, intensive patient care, and client communication and education. Graduates pass the national board test and state credentialing

requirements, after which they are designated either a registered veterinary technician (RVT), licensed veterinary technician (LVT), licensed veterinary medical technician (LVMT) or certified veterinary technician (CVT) based upon the licensing board of the state in which they work.

- ▶ Veterinary technician specialists (VTS) are credentialed technicians with advanced training, usually three to five years in one of 16 specialties. They pass a rigorous certifying examination. Currently, there are about 1,500 veterinary technician specialists worldwide. The advanced certification allows a VTS to manage complex cases, train team members and create innovative practice protocols.

Second, include technician credentials on anything the public sees, like nametags, scrub tops and business cards. Be sure to spell out the titles for more visual impact. For example, a printed or embroidered ID can say, "Julie, Certified Veterinary Technician," or "Anna, Licensed Veterinary Technician, Veterinary Technician Specialist (Anesthesia)."

Finally, promote an awareness of your credentialed technicians publicly. Throughout the year, use Facebook posts or email blasts to educate clients about the critical role of credentialed

veterinary technicians in patient care. Short videos hosted on your website can show the care, compassion and value that they bring to practices. Also, involve credentialed technicians in creating client education videos that showcase their knowledge and passion, and invite pet owners to show their appreciation during National Veterinary Technician Week. (Mark your calendars for Oct. 13 to 19, 2024.)

2 The Status Quo

Practices often use the term “veterinary technician” inaccurately. That’s why title protection is so important. “Veterinary technician” should be limited to graduates of an American Veterinary Medical Association-accredited program who also pass the Veterinary Technician National Examination (VTNE). The lack of title protection within practices hinders full technician utilization. A NAVTA white paper, “Title Protection for ‘Veterinary Technician’ Is Needed and Desired, but Absent and Misunderstood in Most States” (bit.ly/48ZobGJ), identified three reasons why it’s critical:

- ▶ “Provides respect for credentialing (knowledge, skills, competency).”
- ▶ “Protects the public from misrepresentation by unqualified individuals to be veterinary technicians.”
- ▶ “Ensures a standard of care.”

The white paper noted that 71% of respondents had not discussed title misuse with practice leadership because they believed it wouldn’t matter or would create conflict. Title protection is vital to promoting the professional identity of credentialed technicians within a practice. You can accomplish it by reserving “veterinary technician” for graduates of an accredited program and “credentialed veterinary technician” for graduates who also passed the VTNE. Team members who don’t meet the criteria should be called “veterinary assistants.”

3 Creating Opportunities

A barrier to fully utilizing credentialed veterinary technicians is rooted in the lack of a clearly defined scope of practice. Too often, the job responsibilities of credentialed technicians and veterinary assistants are synonymous. Two ways to address the challenge are differentiating roles and customizing the credentialed technician’s job. For example:

- ▶ Use your state’s practice act to identify which activities a credentialed technician and a veterinary assistant should assume. Veterinarians should become acquainted with the training of their credentialed technicians and delegate all tasks that don’t require diagnosing, prescribing or performing surgery. Veterinary technicians who are allowed to use their skills and knowledge do more

RESOURCES

- ▶ NAVTA 2022 Demographic Survey: bit.ly/3Fsi4gf
- ▶ “Credentialed Veterinary Technician Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards: A Narrative Review”: bit.ly/3s6wvDR
- ▶ “How Empowering Veterinary Technicians Supports Practice Success”: bit.ly/46Mkdzx

meaningful work, which increases engagement and is a powerful antidote to burnout.

- ▶ Tailor work to the individual credentialed veterinary technician, not to the job description. Too often, practice leaders expect team members to perform all the tasks listed in role-specific job descriptions. Such a myopic approach can drive disengagement and reduce job satisfaction, as everyone has different strengths and passions. When credentialed technicians align their daily work with what motivates them, meaning and purpose increase. For some credentialed technicians, it might be creating dental service protocols and client education tools. For others, it might be training newer credentialed technicians and veterinary assistants.

Too often, the credentialed veterinary technician’s role is static, stifling career advancement. Promote opportunities for credentialed technicians within your practice by creating tiers in which accomplishing a set of competencies moves a person to the next level. Such a system creates a pathway for learning, success and salary increases. The practice benefits by employing technicians who are more committed to the organization and the success of the team and hospital.

How will you advocate for and partner with your irreplaceable credentialed technicians? **TVB**



▲
DR. WENDY HAUSER is the founder of Peak Veterinary Consulting. She writes extensively and speaks frequently about hospital culture, communications, leadership, client relations and operations. She is a member of the AVMA Veterinary Economic Strategy Committee



Earn a VetFolio Certificate in Practice Management. Focused on three distinct areas of veterinary practice, you'll gain knowledge in Finance, Inventory Management and Leadership.

- ✓ **Practice Management 101: Finance**
- ✓ **Practice Management 101: Inventory Management**
- ✓ **Practice Management 101: Leadership**

Scan here to earn your certificate today!



Each course in this series offers 3 hours of CE, for a total of 9 hours. VetFolio Certificates are free for Subscribers and \$99 for everyone else.

Learn more at VetFolio.com

