Perceptions of the Veterinary Profession among Human Health Care Students before an Inter-Professional Education Course

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Introduction/Objectives
Conflicts among health care professionals often stem from misconceptions about each profession’s role in the health care industry. Anecdotally, the veterinarian has often felt devalued and burdened to prove him/herself as a “real doctor”. At times, this has led to the feeling of “bad blood” between the veterinary and human medical professions. These hurt feelings and divisive tendencies impede progress in multidisciplinary collaborations, particularly the One Health Initiative, to improve human, animal, and environmental health. Two-thirds of infectious diseases are zoonotic, and almost three-fourths of emerging human diseases originated in animals. Yet many physicians do not feel comfortable with managing zoonoses. At the same time, many veterinarians underestimate their role in public health despite their extensive training in comparative and preventative medicine. Recently, some physicians have expressed the desire to collaborate with veterinarians on clinical cases. This represents an encouraging shift towards a collaborative state. More physicians may be willing to collaborate with veterinarians if they are exposed to the profession during their formative years of medical training. The goal of inter-professional education (IPE) is to repair rifts between health care professions by encouraging students to communicate their professional identities with colleagues in unrelated health care disciplines.

Methods
Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to conduct an online survey to identify baseline perceptions about veterinary medicine among entry-level human health care students before their enrollment in a required inter-professional course. Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary. The survey included Likert-type scales and free-text questions.

Survey participants were asked what they knew about the practice of veterinary medicine, and to rank the importance of various roles that veterinarians play in society. Participants were also asked to consider collaborative efforts between veterinary and human health care professionals: what did human health care students want veterinarians to know about their chosen profession? What did human health care students need to know about veterinarians to facilitate their inter-professional collaboration?

Results
Survey participants expressed their interest in and respect for the discipline of veterinary medicine, but indicated that their unfamiliarity with the profession hindered their ability to collaborate. Twenty percent of human health care students did not know the length of a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program and 27.6% were unaware that veterinarians could specialize. Although 83.2% of participants agreed that maintaining the human–animal bond is a central role of the veterinary profession, veterinary contributions to stem cell research, food and water safety, public health, environmental conservation, and the military were infrequently recognized.

Discussion/Implications
If IPE is to successfully pave the way for multidisciplinary collaboration, it needs to address these gaps in knowledge and broaden the definition of veterinary practice for future human health care providers.