

# COVID-19 ONE YEAR LATER

## VETERINARY CONTINUING EDUCATION

BY CAROLYN SHADLE, PHD

The year 2020 challenged every facet of the veterinary profession to adapt, and veterinary continuing education proved to be no different. Pivoting planned programs that traditionally catered to more in-person offerings and addressing new educational needs required agility and outside-the-box thinking, while traditional areas of focus expanded to include COVID-19 issues.

### THE SHIFT TO VIRTUAL

In the early months of the pandemic, Christine Shupe, Executive Director of the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (VHMA), said the organization transformed the annual in-person conference to a virtual event to ensure VHMA members had access to needed professional development and continuing education.<sup>1</sup>

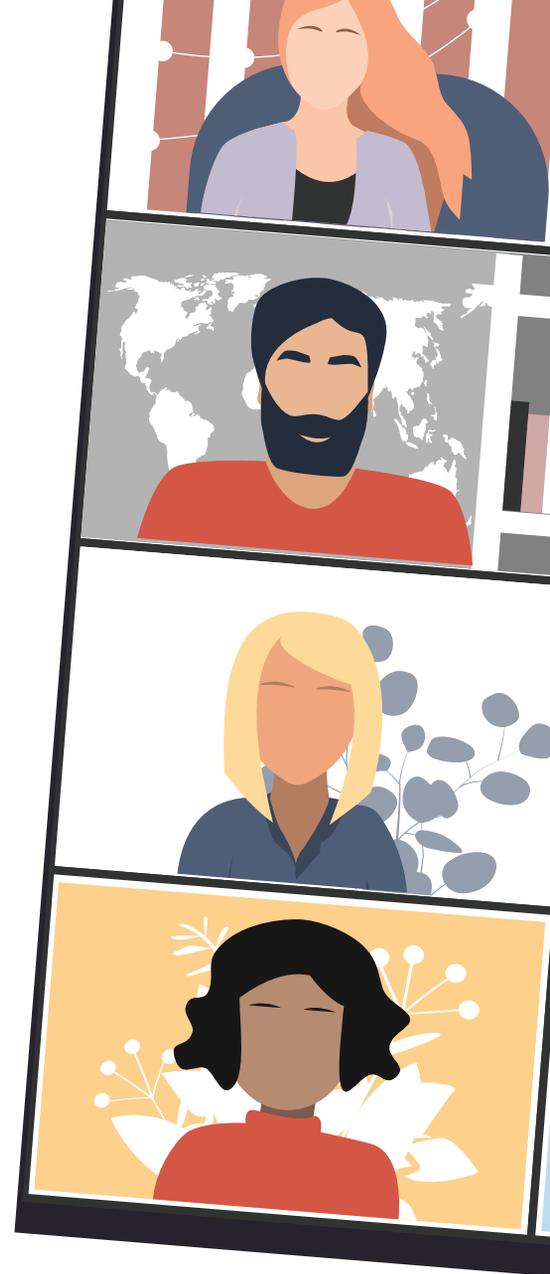
Professional organizations at the state level also mobilized quickly to meet the crisis. Like most continuing education providers, the Southern California Veterinary Management Association (SCVMA) has traditionally built many of its education offerings around in-person offerings. Instead, in 2020 the SCVMA recalibrated its events, conducting live Zoom meetings.<sup>2</sup> Candace Joy, CEO of the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association, said the pandemic hit just as they were finalizing

preparations for their annual conference of 1,200 attendees and 100 exhibitors, quickly identifying the need to shift the entire event to virtual. Fortunately, they found a great vendor to provide a virtual platform that enabled them to offer 130 hours of CE, including live and prerecorded continuing education, as well as an exhibit hall, games, and engagement opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

### HYBRID OPTIONS

With a commitment to hands-on learning, the Viticus Group (formerly WVC) initially shut down for three months, according to Chief Veterinary Medical Officer Anthony Pease, DVM, MS, DACVR. They adjusted offerings to learning experiences through Facebook Live prerecorded events and online webinars to prepare for hands-on events.

This year, they have rescheduled the traditional WVC Annual Conference from February to September 2021 and have formatted the conference to offer a hybrid option, making select topics available via live stream. Fortunately, by owning their catering and shuttle services, Viticus Group is confident they can ensure high cleaning standards. Also, having access to large spaces makes it possible to offer hands-on events with social distancing – and everyone masked, of course.<sup>4</sup>



### EXHIBITS AND NETWORKING REIMAGINED

A highlight of annual conferences is strolling through the exhibit hall, picking up tchotchkes, and meeting vendors. Conferences that went virtual did a fantastic job of digitally presenting their vendors with attractive images and engaging descriptions. As attendees clicked, they could enter contact information to proceed with further engagement, such as asking questions. Yet while vendors loved acquiring the contact information, they missed the face-to-face conversation. Communicating virtually meant that visitors missed the “accidental” learning that strolling provides. Missed most of



all was the opportunity to establish or reengage in the beloved relationships that form trust, the foundation of sales.

Many virtual conferences took into account the value of this kind of networking. To promote relationship-building connections, they provided virtual “lounges” that encouraged participants to “meet” with colleagues and/or make new acquaintances, just as they would at the coffee station during the on-site conference.

#### **NEW CHANNELS, NEW CONTENT**

Less overhead and time required for travel and accommodations

afforded additional time to leverage new technologies such as Zoom video conferencing, Loom video messaging, and social media sites like Facebook.<sup>5</sup> VHMA quickly added webinars for members to address COVID-19 related issues relevant to the veterinary profession. And the VHMA also launched its Manager-to-Manager podcast series in August of 2020.

Individual instructors created pre-recorded presentations to accommodate learner needs. Jenifer Chatfield, DVM, Dipl. ACZM, Dipl. ACVPM, said she missed not being

able to say, “Are you with me?” following a poll at the FETCHdvm360 conference where she inquired about how people were adapting since the pandemic. As a result, she was able to modify her presentation. However, when she read one response, “scared to death,” Jenifer wanted to hear more and validate the participant’s feelings but was not able to do so in that medium.<sup>6</sup>

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## A WIDER AUDIENCE

The option of virtual conferences attracted new audiences, not only nationally but also internationally. Peter Weinstein, DVM, of SCVMA was particularly aware that the new formats attracted additional attendees, such as younger veterinary team members who are comfortable with online platforms. And even when practices were extra busy, there was no decrease in interest in learning. “That says a lot about the profession,” he said.

Abby Suiter, MBA, CVPM, practice manager of Daniel Island Animal Hospital in South Carolina, appreciated the VHMA webinars and discussion boards – specifically, the ones that addressed COVID-19 with topics such as navigating the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), applying the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) benefits, and transitioning to curbside care.

She was among the many who appreciated learning new things and needed the continuing education credits. Therefore, she was pleased to attend the VHMA Annual Conference virtually, held in blocks of time every few days over several weeks. This made it possible to participate while accommodating personal and professional scheduling needs. Despite the advantages, she says she will still opt for in-person conferences, preferring in-person networking and socialization.<sup>7</sup>

Kathy Hickey, DVM, of Poulsbo Marina Veterinary Clinic in Poulsbo, Washington, found it enjoyable to obtain continuing education from her home “in my PJs with my cat.” She did not have to choose between two valuable lectures, knowing they

were recorded for future viewing on demand. She appreciated the ability to watch the presentations on her schedule, rather than all in one weekend.<sup>8</sup>

## THE RACE RESPONSE

Providers and learners alike respect the uniform standard for veterinary medical continuing education administered by the American Association of Veterinary State Boards (AAVSB). When COVID-19 arrived on the scene, AAVSB made changes to the Registry of Approved Continuing Education (RACE) standards, simplifying the delivery methods to “Live” or “Anytime” events.

A notable addition is the RACEtrack program launched during the pandemic. When the licensee creates a RACEtrack account, RACE approved continuing education is automatically incorporated into their record, providing electronic tracking of their CE.<sup>9</sup>

## ADVANCING CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE

The Patterson Veterinary University (PVU) team, reflecting on the past year of continuing education, is amazed by the year of advancements made by the veterinary profession. Leading the way, PVU presented a first-of-its-kind complimentary Telehealth: Veterinary Curbside Care course, developed a Veterinary Practice Adaptation and Continuity Planning (VPACP) course relevant to and beyond COVID-19, and launched the first medical continuing education offerings in the PVU course catalog.<sup>10</sup>



COVID-19 highlighted the knowledge, skills, and abilities we are all capable of when it comes to adapting to CE opportunities. Our profession will only win when it comes to more inclusive and creative offerings. While the 2021 road map may be unknown, veterinary continuing education has made positive strides to accommodate the profession’s needs, and the future is bright. ■

### References

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