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TITLE: Why don't boys apply to vet school? A pilot study

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INTRODUCTION

Veterinary medicine is an increasingly female-dominated profession. Although the current workforce is gender-balanced overall, it is highly skewed towards older male vets and younger female entrants (Figure 1) (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons 2014).

Statistics show that male school-leavers are not less successful in gaining places; they are simply not applying for veterinary degrees (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2014). The recent VetFutures report specifically identified the gender imbalance as *“raising questions about attractiveness of veterinary medicine as a career choice for men”* (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons/British Veterinary Association 2015). This study therefore looked at why, given the similarities in entry requirements and training structure, male school-leavers do not consider it as a career option equivalent to medicine or dentistry.

Various studies have looked at gender in the context of higher education decision-making, with broadly similar results. Briggs (2006) and Gross (2011) found that boys prioritised academic reputation, quality of staff, employment prospects and social life; whereas girls preferred courses with work placements and relied more on their own perceptions of the institution and course based on campus visits. Galotti (1995) also reported gender differences; boys being more analytical and girls relying more on intuition and “feel”.

A number of factors have contributed to the higher numbers of women entering veterinary medicine: overall expansion of the profession (Lincoln 2013), a self-reinforcing cycle of female role models (Polavieja 2012, Mastekaasa 2008), more women studying secondary sciences (Hodgetts 2008), and changes in the nature of veterinary work itself (Institute for Employment Studies 2013). However, the opposite side - what might discourage male applicants - is less well understood. So, the aim of this study was to investigate a simple question: why don't boys apply to vet school?

METHODS

Email contact was made with the Head of Sixth Form/Post-16 (or equivalent) at all secondary schools in one English county, to anonymously survey any school-leaver applicants for medicine, dentistry or veterinary degrees in the 2014 application round. A weblink was provided to the survey. For each degree, respondents were asked whether they had applied, considered, or not considered that subject, and to explain their choice. Free-text responses were analysed thematically; seeking similarities or differences between male and female applicants.

Ethical approval of the project was granted by the Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Advisory Group for Human Participants, University of Kent.

RESULTS

Thirty completed responses were received (11 male, 19 female). In explaining their choice of profession, Males and females differed in their thoughts about future career plans and the nature of the day-to-day work; whereas the themes of childhood ambition and family influence were identified by both. Quotes are identified by M (male) or F (female); and course applied for: Med (human medicine), Den (dentistry) or Vet (veterinary medicine).

Male and female applicants equally cited a long-held ambition as a reason for their choice, and emphasised the vocational aspect of the course: *"I've always had a strong desire to study medicine - I wanted a vocation, not just a degree"* [M Med]. Males stated exactly where they envisioned their career going: *"I plan to work as an associate dentist for 3-5 years to gain experience, then specialise in orthodontics and open my own practice"* [M Den]. Female applicants were less certain about their plans: *"I don't really know, I want to work with patients but haven't decided yet"* [F Den]. They also tended to word their ambitions in the form of picturing themselves in a particular role: *"I can see*

myself working on a farm in Cornwall" [F Vet], whereas males focused on the concrete aspects of the work.

Both groups cited family influences: *"I have several family members who are dentists... I know that if I qualify as a dentist, I will have their support"* [M Den]. The other common inspiration was past experience of a profession, either in their personal lives: *"[My] Grandfather took ill with cancer... why should I not help to bring about new treatments?"* [M Med]; or gained during work experience: *"I felt very encouraged by someone I met on work experience... at the end of the week he encouraged me to apply"* [F Vet].

Male applicants mostly cited the nature of the work itself as a reason not to choose a particular degree: *"I need to be on the go and dentists are sitting down all day... not enough pressure comes with the job"* [M Med]. Several female applicants rejected medicine due to concerns about their own ability to cope with specific aspects of the work: *"I don't like the idea of being in a job where people are dying"* [F Vet]; *"The reality is that you spend far too much time worried sick that you've made a serious mistake"* [F Den]; a factor which appealed to several male applicants: *"I relish the mental and emotional challenges that this course will give me"* [M Med].

In general, female applicants found it harder to articulate what exactly about a particular course or career put them off: *"Hard to explain, human medicine didn't interest me at all"* [F Vet]; compared to males, who cited very specific reasons for their choice: *"It allows for continuous professional development. I was attracted to the prospect of opening and running my own practices as I have a keen business side"* [M Den].

DISCUSSION

Galotti's (1995) study of higher education decision-making found that girls care more about people and surroundings, and boys more about future success; and this can be identified in the responses received. The defined structure for career progression in both medicine and dentistry provides a clear post-qualification route for graduates which is missing from the veterinary profession, meaning that, on the evidence of medical and dental applicants, male applicants would be less able to identify a potential career path in veterinary medicine.

The trend is still developing in favour of more women entering, forming a self-reinforcing cycle of female role models; and concern has been expressed about the profession needing to better represent the community it serves. Aligning career development in a similar way to the medical model would provide a clear structure for newly-qualified vets and therefore enable male applicants to better envisage their future prospects. This is obviously only one factor, and warrants further investigation.

Limitations to this study include its small scale, geographic (and therefore demographic) constraint, and restriction to solely school-leaver applicants. A larger-scale study is now desirable to gather enough data for meaningful statistical analysis, deepen the qualitative data gathered with more in-depth interviews or focus groups, and broaden the demographic to include graduate entry and overseas applicants; and to explore what the implications might be for the future of the profession.

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FIGURE 1

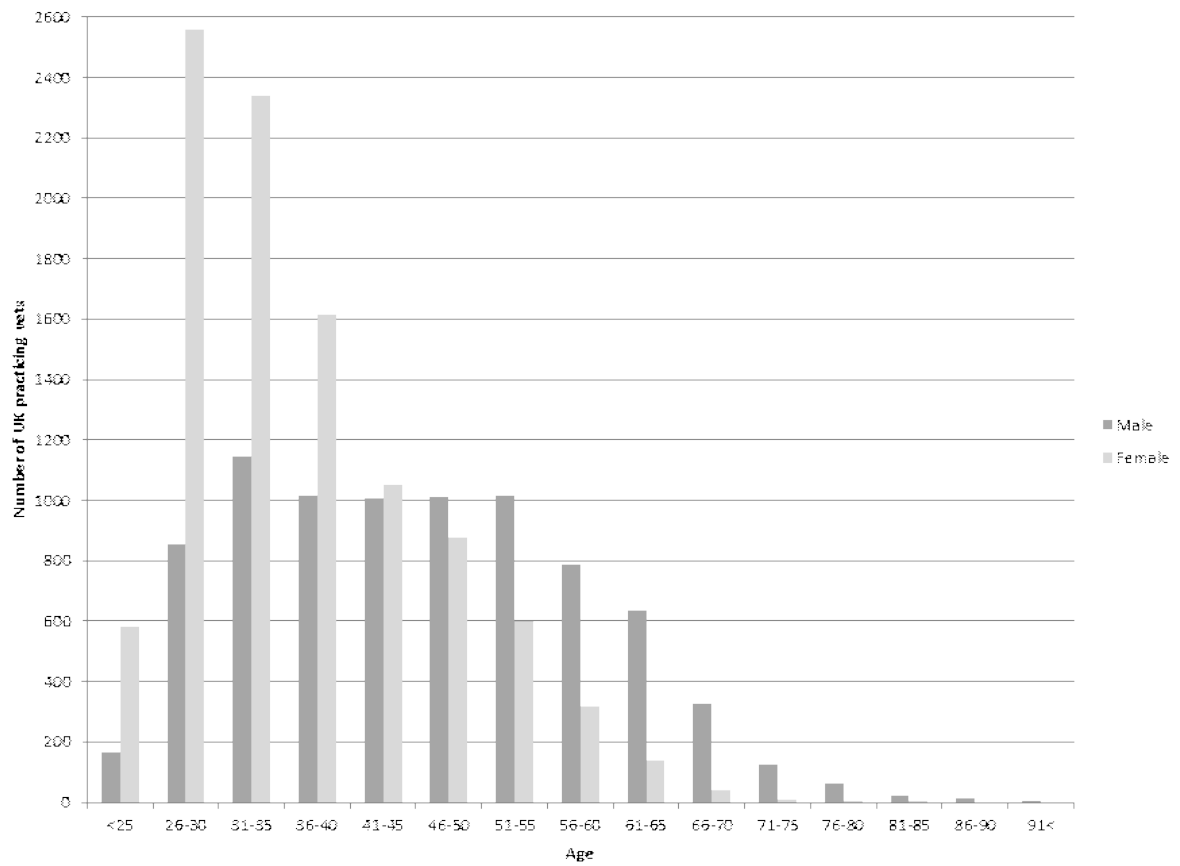


Figure 1 Caption: Age and gender of currently practicing veterinarians in the UK