

About one-quarter of board-certified, practicing veterinarians in the United States are 60 years of age or older, according to a recent AVMA survey. A significant portion of these have already passed the “normal” retirement age of 65 but have decided to stay on the job for at least a little while longer—or in some cases, for as long as their health permits.

But others were well prepared for life outside the bounds of a clinical practice or other veterinary-related business or occupation. They chose to leave the profession with their health intact and their capacity to enjoy life undiluted. These individuals saw retirement as an opportunity rather than a necessity, and they were prepared to take advantage of that opportunity when the time arose.

Four of these fortunate men and women chose to share their thoughts with Trends on the ins, outs, ups, and downs of retirement. Each has made a successful transition to that exalted state, and others could learn from their examples.

Before Retirement: Business Succession Plans

The AVMA survey revealed that baby boomers represent about one-third of veterinary practice owners.



“A retired person who lives their whole life in their job and says, ‘I can’t wait ‘till I retire because then I’m going to start doing things I want to do,’ I don’t think you are going to be very happy.” —DUANE LANDALS, DVM



Robert Binder, DVM

With a growing number of these veterinary entrepreneurs looking to make a graceful exit, corporations and private-equity firms have been purchasing practices across the United States and Canada in ever-accelerating numbers. Even the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to dim their ardor, since the demand for veterinary services in the United States is relatively inelastic.

For veterinarians preparing to retire, the arrival of the corporations and the private-equity investors has made potential buyers more plentiful. But many practice owners are reticent about selling to corporations, fearing that bottom-line concerns will compromise the quality of animal care.

Robert Binder, DVM, founded AAHA-accredited Saugus Animal Hospital in suburban Boston in 1987 and maintained sole ownership of the practice until 2017, when he sold it to Community Veterinary Partners. But he only agreed to sell after he was convinced they'd preserve the culture he and his associates spent years building.

“They don’t do any branding of the practice,” he said. “They don’t change the culture. One discussion I had was that, ‘Hey, we are interested in your practice because you did certain things right, why would we change that?’”

When Duane Landals, DVM, chose to sell his practice in Morinville, Alberta,

to a corporate entity, he too did so only after receiving assurances that nothing would dramatically change.

“They agreed that they were going to keep all the same staff, and they are going to keep things the same way,” he remembered. “We said, this is my community, this is my third generation in this community, and it’s important to me this practice keeps the same values, goals, and client service, etc. Those are the things that we were more interested in negotiating than the price—the continuity of practice.”

Many independent veterinary practice operators would prefer to sell their businesses to trusted associates.

This can be an option, but younger veterinarians are emerging from school with much higher debt loads than in the past, which is inhibiting many from pursuing ownership and the added debt it would entail.

Practice owners who wait until they’re nearing retirement age to find a successor may come away disappointed. If they’re determined to pass their business along to a hand-chosen associate, they should identify that person several years beforehand to verify that the interest and the commitment are really there.

This is what Mark Russak, DVM, CVJ (an AAHA past president), did at his practice in Berlin, Connecticut.

“I had trained my associate,” Russak said. “She was with me 14 years and she took the practice over, and it didn’t miss a step.

“I actually took more time off in the last couple of years from my practice than I ever had before,” he said. “It was intentional, so that people would have to work with my other doctors and not just me.”

Regardless of the identity of the purchaser, it is natural for veterinarians who own their practices to worry about what will happen to their businesses after they retire. Not because of pride or ego, but because of their commitment to their communities, and their concern over the health and welfare of the animals they built their businesses to serve.

Succession Matters to Employees, Too

MaryBeth Soto, CVPM, worked as the practice manager at AAHA-accredited Main Street Veterinary Hospital and Dental Clinic in Flower Mound, Texas, for 23 years. When she decided to step away from her position in the spring of 2020, she did so with total peace of mind,

knowing they were prepared to carry on without her— mainly because of her efforts to make sure they'd be able to do so.

“I feel that I have been preparing over the past several years to make it easy for them, especially with the AAHA guidelines of having everything written down and all the protocols, then everybody knows what to do,” she said.

Before leaving in May, Soto let the members of her team know they could call anytime to ask questions or talk over problems. She has been pleased to see a progressive reduction in those calls as the months have passed.

“I think the big thing is being prepared to retire almost at any time,” Soto explained. “What if something happens to me? We went out of the country for two weeks in October and that really set a lot of the foundation for me retiring, feeling good about it because they were able to handle things.

“I'm so happy they are succeeding, because that was my baby,” Soto said.

A Succession Plan for Life

The question, “What are you going to do with your time after you retire?” is a relatively easy one to answer for some veterinarians. But for others, uncertainty remains.



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AAHA guidelines of having everything written down and all the protocols, then everybody knows what to do.” —MARYBETH SOTO, CVPM

As revealed by the AVMA survey, approximately 25% of currently practicing veterinarians are past the age of 60, and this includes a significant number who have surpassed the retirement age of 65. This group undoubtedly includes many who have no clear idea about what they might do after retirement and who have decided to continue working at a job they love in lieu of heading into the unknown.

“One of my veterinarian friends, we’ve gotten together for lunch once or twice a year over the years,” Binder recalled. “We talked about management issues, talked about patient issues and client issues, and I think his hobby really was veterinary medicine. I’m going to be 66. He’s going to be, I think 72, and he’s still working.”

While Binder also loved his job, he never had any doubt about his priorities.

“Family is more important than the practice,” he stated. “I viewed the practice as any kind of job I would do. I felt like this is a means to an end.”

He quickly added that he was glad to work in a profession that contributed to society and always felt “an obligation and a responsibility to do that right.”

Nevertheless, he didn’t lose sight of the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Consequently, when it was time to retire, he did so willingly and fully prepared to move on to other things.

“I was becoming increasingly aware of my age, and my outside interests were starting to attract more of my attention,” he explained. “I was thinking I really accomplished everything I wanted to do as a veterinarian. I was a veterinarian for 40 years at that point.”

Landals and Russak both have words of caution for veterinarians who think they can just flip the retirement switch after a lifetime of being too wrapped up in their work.

“A retired person who lives their whole life in their job and says, ‘I can’t wait ’till I retire because then I’m going to start doing things I want to do,’ I don’t think you are going to be very happy,” Landals said.

Landals describes his retirement as a “natural evolution.” It was his love for horses that drew him to the veterinary profession, and he and his wife now have more time to spend with their horses than ever before. “Our hobby was continuous,” he said. “It wasn’t, ‘When I retire I’m going to start going fishing,’ or something like that.”

Notwithstanding a string of noteworthy accomplishments in the veterinary field, Russak wholeheartedly agrees.

“Veterinary medicine was my job; it wasn’t my life,” he stated. “The ones who are not happy and the ones who are dreading retirement, it is because veterinary medicine has become their life. Your family should be your life. Your outside interests should be your life. Veterinary medicine is a job. It’s an incredible job, and you get to love it and you get to go and do it every day, but you need to let go of it.”

A pleasant retirement is far more likely for veterinarians who cultivate other interests well before the time to retire arrives. Without proper attention to a healthy work-life balance, retirement may be a disappointing, frustrating, or boring experience.

Answering the Call

Landals, Russak, and Binder all spoke at length about the importance of family and how they treasure the time they get to spend doing things they love in the company of people they love. Soto was motivated to retire in part because her husband had already done so; as she put it, “I decided if he gets to stay home, then by goodness, I want to stay home, too.”



“I love what I did, and I don’t feel I ever worked a day. I was truly never bored by anything in veterinary medicine.” —MARK RUSSAK, DVM, CVJ

But the veterinary profession is more than just a career choice. For most veterinarians, it is a true passion. It penetrates their minds and hearts and leaves them unable to imagine a future in which they are no longer helping animals, interacting with peers, or furthering the progress of veterinary medicine through some other means.

Russak sold his practice in 2003. But he followed up his initial “retirement” by taking a teaching position at Mississippi State University for seven years, and then moving on to the lecture circuit (and the AAHA presidency) after that.

“I’ve lectured in every vet school in the United States—most of them multiple times—half of Canada, all of the Caribbean, and I’ve lectured in Europe also,” he said, listing off his postretirement activities. “I do relief work in my own practice. I also volunteer at two shelters. I’m on the board of one of them. I was on the International Council for Veterinary

Assessment board, which does the NAVLE, the veterinary board test. I was on that board for six years, and I am now on the North American Veterinary Community board. I’m just giving that background so you’ll know why I love retirement.”

Landals is another retired veterinarian who didn’t remove himself from the profession after he stopped practicing. After selling his practice in Morinville, Alberta, Canada, Landals accepted an offer to become the registrar of the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association. He held that post for 14 years, before “retiring” for the second time.

But this “retirement” was no more permanent than the first one. Landals currently serves as the president of the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, among many other duties.

“I’m also a volunteer with Veterinarians Without Borders, providing animal care and services in remote indigenous communities in the north,” he said. “I’m on the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association’s working group for dog importation.”



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“I still don’t feel like I’m retired,” he joked. “But I haven’t been paid for 10 or 15 years probably now, so I guess I retired.”

As for Binder, he is still searching for his next challenge.

“I have all this experience and knowledge, and I would like to think that most of it is useful,” he said. Binder would like to mentor younger veterinarians but regrets that he hasn’t found “a pathway for that” yet.

No matter how well prepared a veterinarian may be for retirement, for most, the urge to stay involved is irresistible. Perhaps this is best explained by a popular quote shared by Russak during his interview for this article: “If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life.”

“I love what I did, and I don’t feel I ever worked a day. I was truly never bored by anything in veterinary medicine,” he said.

Retirement does represent a life transformation, regardless of what form it takes. But the happiest veterinarians in retirement are likely those who find a way to stay engaged with a profession that most perceive as a calling. They don’t let it take over their life, but they don’t deny how much it means to them, either.

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