# The Vet School– A Political Stampede ?

**by Jerry Adams**

PLANS FOR BUILDING a school of veterinary medicine in North Carolina have been bouncing like a political basketball for the past ten years, but the game may now be in its closing moments. Both the UNC Board of Governors and the administration of Governor Jim Hunt strongly favor building a vet school here, and this summer the General Assembly is likely to be asked for an additional appropriation of $7.28 million for the project. Already the legislature has put aside $2 million for capital outlay, and state government is spending about half a million dollars a year on the program.

In spite of these developments, however, serious questions continue to be raised about whether North Carolina needs to build a vet school at all.

Most experts agree that it is large-animal owners in sparsely populated counties who now lack good local veterinary care. But vet schools inevitably turn out many doctors who wish to treat dogs, cats, and canaries in urban areas. Some opponents wonder whether the cost of building and operating a vet school will be justified if it is uncertain whether those most in need of veterinary services will benefit from the investment. Other opponents question whether North Carolina, the South, and the nation can cope with all the veterinarians coming into the field if informed predictions about future graduation figures prove true. Still others say that North Carolina can obtain sufficient veterinary services by continuing its present policy of sending students to schools in other states. With some innovative assignment programs developed in tandem, they argue, returning graduates could be directed to the neediest counties.

Dr. Terrence M. Curtin, the head of the Department of Veterinary Science at N. C. State University and the man who put together plans for a veterinary school in this state, cautions against giving credence to such dissenting views. He says that although there might be some disagreement at the department level, the minds at the top of the university hierarchy are made up. "The state ought to look at it (the proposed vet school) as an asset," Curtin observed, "and not just an expense." John Sanders, the university system's vice president for planning, agrees that because the Board of Governors and Gov. Hunt have made it a matter of policy to advocate the school, the question is settled. Any state or university administrative employee who cannot support that policy, Sanders suggests, should seek employment elsewhere.

The need for good veterinary services has been evident since settlers first grew dependent on domesticated animals. Today, an industry relies upon veterinarians. North Carolina ranks 10th in the nation in cash receipts from agriculture and 18th in cash receipts from livestock and livestock products. Livestock has come to be known here as "a billion-dollar industry."

AT TIMES, the story of this state's march toward establishing its own veterinary school is reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* when the decision was made to build a windmill "and there would be no more debates."

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), a research and co-ordinating agency of state governments in the Southeast, began in 1949 to act as broker in matching students from Southern colleges with available positions at veterinary schools. Under the SREB program, prospective veterinary students undergo rigorous preliminary training, calling for pre-veterinary courses that usually take three years of study. The SREB's "contract" program now provides 37 places each year for North Carolina students, and North Carolina pays $5,500 per student-year for each place at Auburn University and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and $8,000 per student-year at Ohio State University. The number of places available to state students is expected to hold steady,

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if not to grow, in the 1980s. Approximately 100 North Carolina residents now compete for the contract program each year.

In 1967, the executive committee of the N. C. Veterinary Medical Association announced its support for establishment of a veterinary medical school at N. C. State. By 1970, the idea had gained political support, including that of Gov. Robert W. Scott, a dairy farmer. Two investigative studies were commissioned. The first was undertaken for the Governor by Dr. Ronald H. Williams, a Raleigh veterinarian, and a 13-member committee; the second was handled by Dr. Calvin W. Schwabe of the University of California, who reported to state education officials.

In the early 1970s, however, other states were getting the same idea. For 30 years, only Auburn University, Tuskegee Institute, the University of Georgia, and Texas A & M University had had veterinary schools in the South. In 1974, Louisiana State University, the University of Florida, the University of Tennessee, and Mississippi State University either opened or began planning veterinary schools. And all except Texas A & M, which had never admitted outside students, planned to consider out-of-state applicants.

Noting this ferment, the SREB issued a report which suggested opposition to North Carolina's plans for yet another vet school in the region: "We recommend that during the next decade no additional schools of veterinary medicine beyond the approved ones for Mississippi State University and the University of Tennessee be developed in the SREB region. With these new schools in operation, together with those developing at LSU and the University of Florida, the region will have eight schools of veterinary medicine. . . . Dedicated and careful cooperation among these schools and with other states can meet the region's foreseeable needs for opportunity to study veterinary medicine and for supplying the region with adequate veterinary services." In a 1976 follow-up report, the Board pointed out that Southern veterinary schools had graduated 350 animal physicians the preceding year, and that the same schools would graduate 635 veterinarians by 1981. These estimates did not include potential new graduates from Virginia, where the legislature was also considering a veterinary medical school.

In late 1974, the Board of Governors delivered to the General Assembly its rationale for wanting North Carolina to have its own school. "The costs of establishing and operating a school of veterinary medicine are high," the Board acknowledged. "The Southern Regional Education Board has taken the position that the creation of so many new veterinary medical schools may constitute a substantial overbuilding of veterinarian-training capacity in the region. While we are fully aware of the concern that has been repeatedly expressed by SREB over the possibility that the South may shortly move from a position of having too few schools of veterinary medicine to one of having too many, we believe that that does not answer the question of whether North Carolina should have a school of veterinary medicine."

**Does the evidence justify a policy decision to build a school of veterinary medicine in NC?**

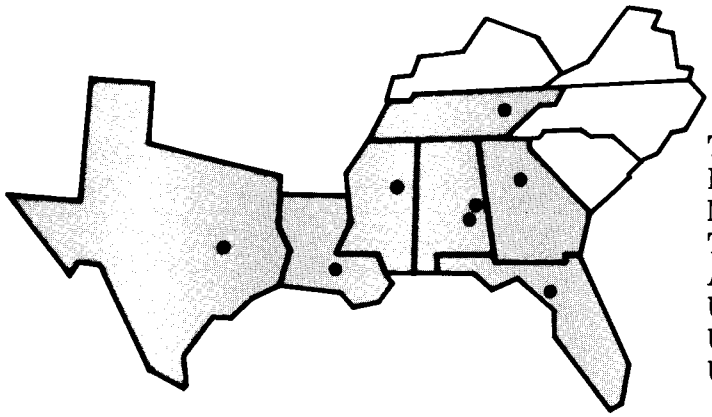
The focus of the state's interest had apparently shifted. The training of practicing veterinarians, once thought to be the primary objective of an in-state vet school, had become a secondary justification. "It is clear to us," the Board of Governors continued, "that without a veterinary medical school of our own, North Carolina cannot expect to obtain the clinical and diagnostic services needed by the various elements of its animal industry, the research and clinical investigation activities vital to the well-being of our animal population, and the continuing education programs needed by veterinarians and others with substantial responsibilities for maintaining the health and well-being of large segments of our animal population. Unlike the training of veterinary practitioners, these services cannot feasibly be contracted across state lines."

The position taken by the Board of Governors late in 1974 soon led to an initial appropriation of money for a school of veterinary medicine in North Carolina, even though the Board had not specified which clinical, diagnostic, and research services were to be established and had not stated whether existing programs in state schools could be used to develop some or all of the needed services. The 1975 General Assembly was asked for more than $3 million to begin work on the project. The appropriation received for the biennium amounted to $500,000.

In 1977, the petition for funds was reiterated, this time with specific programs spelled out and with more money in mind. The Board of Governors asked for $9.28 million for capital outlay, with operating costs for the biennium, weighted toward the second year, set at $966,199. The General Assembly appropriated only $2 million as a capital fund, but did continue the $500,000 yearly outlay for operating planning costs. The request in the coming session of the legislature is expected to be $7.28 million in capital funds to go with the $2 million already in reserve.

Ultimately, according to Curtin's plans, the total capital investment in North Carolina's proposed vet

## Existing Vet Schools in the South



Texas A & M University
Louisiana State University
Mississippi State
Tuskegee Institute
Auburn University
University of Florida
University of Georgia
University of Tennessee

school will amount to $31,960,000. By the sixth year of operation, when plans call for 288 undergraduates, annual operating costs are projected at $4,269,500. Counting graduate students, interns, residents and post-doctoral candidates, the school would then have a projected enrollment of 345, a faculty of 83, and a student-faculty ratio of 3.5:1.

THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS' 1974 statement and the legislature's response in 1975 seemed to commit North Carolina to the establishment of a school of veterinary medicine, but the process has moved slowly and not without controversy since then. Officials of the N. C. Veterinary Medical Association say that most veterinarians in the state support the idea, but Dr. James W. Eubanks of Winston-Salem, who counts himself in the opposition, claims that "the rank and file are not being listened to." Eubanks suggests that the new veterinary school risks mediocrity by stretching too thin the qualified faculty pool, and that graduates will be unable to find sufficient work. Even the proposed site of the school provoked a dispute between proponants of an NCSU location and others who felt that it should be installed at North Carolina A & T in Greensboro. A federal court ruled in July, 1976, that placement of the vet school at N. C. State would not be a racially unacceptable decision, but the issue may be far from settled.

There has also been dissension inside state government about the proposed school, mainly in the form of reports produced at taxpayers' expense and then quietly shelved because they suggested alternatives to prevailing policy. Two recent studies, conducted separately, have concluded that a school of veterinary medicine in North Carolina would be an expensive redundance.

Employees of the Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly surveyed 377 respondents throughout the state to arrive at findings published in *A Survey of Large Animal Owners in North Carolina, 1973-74.* Their research indicated that among large animal owners the most frequent users of veterinary services are dairymen, and that the chief deterrent to using veterinary services was cost. Many owners apparently treated sick or injured animals themselves, on the theory that it is more economical to lose a $100 investment than to spend $150 on veterinary services. Some 66 per cent of the respondents said veterinarians in their areas were willing to treat large animals, and the research showed that the average distance to the nearest vet was 15.2 miles. Only 2.7 percent (10 respondents) cited the lack of veterinary services as the major reason for not expanding their businesses, while 64 per cent cited the lack of profit potential as the reason for not expanding. "On the basis of the findings," the report stated, "we conclude that low use of veterinary services is due more to economic reasons than to lack of access, and that vet services are more available than used." So far, the study has produced no shift in the state's vet school policy.

The second study, done by an employee of the Division of State Budget and Management (DBM), has been similarly ignored by state and university officials. Titled *The Veterinary Medical School Issue Analysis,* it suggested that, while the state's animal population is holding steady, North Carolina is already moving toward the American Veterinary Medical Association's goal of 17.5 veterinarians per 100,000 population and will reach this mark by 1985. In addition, the study concluded that the maldistribution of practicing veterinarians in the state---roughly 20 counties have no resident vets---

would not be corrected, or even significantly affected, by establishment of a veterinary school. This conclusion is at least as old as the Schwabe study, which recognized that veterinarians, following economic dictates, gravitate toward urban areas and small-animal practices. Perhaps one-fourth of the total practicing hours among all veterinarians across the state are devoted to large animals, both studies concluded, and nearly all such time is used by vets who practice on both small and large animals. The Budget Division study found, furthermore, that having an in-state vet school does not necessarily insure that graduates will remain within the state to practice. Not surprisingly, this study recommended continuation of the SREB contract program for North Carolina students, including the expenditure of $1.064 million a year for about 38 graduate veterinarians rather than a $32 million investment in construction costs and more than $4 million in yearly operating costs to double the number of graduates.

There is a compelling, dollars-and-cents logic about this conclusion. For the equivalent of the projected $4 million annual veterinary school budget, 100 veterinarians could be hired at $40,000 apiece and sent to every county in the state. But as recently as March 15, 1978, the DBM and the Hunt Administration have both disavowed any respect for the study. "It would be . . . accurate to state," wrote John Williams of the Budget Division on that date, "that the Division of Budget and Management has never . . . agreed with" the conclusions reached in *The Veterinary Medical School Issue Analysis.* Indicating that the Budget Division lacked adequate staff and information to do a satisfactory study, Marvin Dorman, deputy state budget officer, said the administration does "not consider the conclusion of the (DBM) paper to be based on valid and accurate assumptions and data."

THE NEED FOR a veterinary school in North Carolina is viewed by many proponants as involving far more than merely providing local vet services to isolated communities. Echoing the Board of Governors, Curtin insists that the training of veterinarians is a necessary adjunct to attracting researchers for whom "the thrill of discovery is reflected in their teaching." These are the researchers, Curtin says, who draw government and commercial research grants and who will be a natural addition to the Research Triangle. "I don't think I'll live long enough to see enough veterinarians in North Carolina," he adds. "We could use 40 in the Triangle right now."

But alternatives to the costly and controversial establishment of a vet school in North Carolina have been proposed both inside and outside state government. One such alternative, suggested in the disavowed Budget Division study, bears directly on the desire for more research and diagnostic service. According to the study, the existing Department of Veterinary Science at N. C. State could be expanded to meet this need without requiring an investment of millions of additional dollars. The Department already offers many of the same graduate programs a new veterinary school would provide, and its continuing education programs could be enlarged in conjunction with those of the state Department of Agriculture and the office of the State Veterinarian to extend research and diagnostic services to those who need them most. In addition, UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University and Bowman Gray Medical School all have existing research capabilities which could be called into play. In fact, thirty-one veterinarians were engaged in animal-medical research programs at N. C. State, UNC-CH, Duke, Bowman Gray and Research Triangle Park Laboratories at the same time this study was underway.

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Several other alternatives have come from E.W. Glazner of N. C. State, who administers the SREB contract program for North Carolina residents and who describes himself as a supporter of the proposal to build a vet school here. Glazner suggests that candidates for the contract program might be required to obligate for a period of practice in certain areas. A similar concept is widely used in the awarding of scholarships in other professional disciplines. Glazner also says that veterinarians, who have considerable medical training, could overlap their duties with responsibilities pertaining to public health. Although such a program is not suited for an urban area with specialized needs, Glazner points out that "in sparsely populated areas it would provide a service the people might not have."

While alternatives such as these for better deployment of existing veterinary resources do not necessarily preclude the establishment of a vet school in North Carolina, they do suggest that further careful consideration of the proposed facility is in order. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) will publish its nationwide manpower study in July, and its findings are almost certain to bear heavily on this state's situation. But the AVMA's report will probably appear too late to prompt a serious review of the options which are now still open. By early summer the General Assembly will have been asked to appropriate an additional $7 million for the controversial program. Depending on the legislature's response, it may be too late in July to turn back. ●