

Just Hatched: Finding my Wings as a Poultry Veterinarian

Elizabeth M. Beilke, DVM, MPH

Cooper Farms, Inc.

Contact: lizb@cooperfarms.com

I have no doubt that if you would go up to any poultry veterinarian today, no matter what age or when they graduated vet school, and ask them about the start of their careers, each one would have a different story. The start to each chapter is a little different and I know that as a student, I often found myself listening to mentors, and imagining how my story might begin. I'll be honest, I had no idea on the lessons in life that were to come upon exiting the hallowed walls and safety of academia. Over the next few minutes, I would like to take you on a brief journey of my first venture into the real world, and some of the lessons learned along the way. I can't discuss them all, as I'd be here all week, but I want to mention a few experiences that I feel shaped my early career and continued to facilitate my development as a Poultry Veterinarian.

March 4, 2015. Do you remember where you were? I was just finishing up the last of my clinical internships prior to graduation in May, and I was spending time with a turkey company in central Minnesota. I'll always remember the look on the clinician's face as he told me the news that there was a suspect notice of AI from the affected company, but nevertheless it sent shivers through my spine. The next day the news was confirmed and all the actions initiated moments earlier began to take on greater urgency to ensure that all the biosecurity expectations already in place were strictly followed in addition to any additional measures that needed to be taken. This was only a couple months before the real start of my career at which time I would become even more deeply involved in disease containment and control. Just two days after receiving my DVM degree and taking the veterinarian's oath, I started my next journey, as a post-graduate Veterinary Associate on the Iowa State University Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza response team. I only spent three months in this role, but it was a series of quick, hard and fast lessons for a newly minted veterinarian. One of the hardest things was being on the 'sideline' as I watched the industry that had taken me under its wing so early in my career struggle with the effects of the 'worst' animal disease outbreak in U.S. history. Needless to say, lessons were learned on all fronts, and many of these earliest lessons followed me into my next chapter.

From disease containment and control to prevention. On August 3rd, 2015, I started my next role as a staff veterinarian with Cooper Farms in Northwest Ohio. My first assignment as a newly indoctrinated poultry veterinarian was to spend time with each team and critically evaluate the biosecurity infrastructure that was in place. I have never been shy about speaking my mind about what I'm truly passionate about, and at this point in my career, I learned quickly that many times it's best to shut your mouth and listen. I learned but probably not quickly enough that you can't change people and opinions don't change overnight. The key to making progress in any area is not pushing, but rather

learning how to 'specialize in communicating effectively' with a lot of different personalities embodied in people who truly care about their job. This takes time and it has also involved a deeper evaluation of myself, both personally and professionally. I will be the first to admit my communication along with my listening skills were and probably still are the areas requiring my utmost attention and personal growth. You come out of vet school, as a bright eyed and bushy tailed new graduate, just bursting with excitement to share and be part of this wonderful profession. What everyone probably realizes in time, is that you need to slow down, and listen to those around you and try to understand and respect their viewpoints too. What you find out is that you can learn a lot more by fully seeking to understand the why's and how's from those who have been in the business long before you. You will also become more effective as a leader and help to achieve the team's goals as well as your own. In my case, I was very fortunate to join the Cooper Farms team. Like the poults they have been hatching and rearing for years before I came along, Cooper Farms has had the patience, time, and resources to allow me to continue to grow. This is not to say that this transition was easy. I'm sure I have frustrated others including myself along the way, but I have no regrets. It is only failing when you do not continually strive to live and learn. No one is perfect. We all have limitations. It's only when you take the student out of the veterinarian that the learning stops, and by that time so does the progression of a career. I've made my share of mistakes and remain to this day my curious, problem-solving self. Knowing what I know now only makes me better, and helps me continue to develop from the young veterinarian towards hopefully becoming a seasoned clinician. That won't be a reality for many years, and will require many more lessons and experiences along the way. With every day that passes, however, there are a new set of challenges. Embrace it. Live and learn!