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Transcript

00:00:01 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook Podcast, where preparation and hard work come together.

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This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you plan your future.

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I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

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Whether you're just starting out, thinking about a career change, or simply curious about what it takes to work in animal health care, this episode will help you understand the journey ahead.

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Today we're discussing the field of veterinary medicine.

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From pre-vet prerequisites and clinical experience to veterinary school and the many career paths veterinarians can pursue, this episode is your warm-up for the preparation, understanding, and dedication it takes to care for animals and build a career in veterinary medicine.

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So what exactly is a veterinarian?

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A veterinarian is a licensed medical professional who diagnoses, treats, and helps prevent diseases and injuries in animals.

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Their work can range from caring for household pets like dogs and cats,

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to working with farm animals, wildlife, or even exotic species in zoos and conservation environments.

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But vet medicine goes beyond just treating animals because it requires knowledge of many different species, each with their own anatomy, health concerns, and behaviors.

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This means veterinarians have to constantly adapt their knowledge depending on the patient in front of them.

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Vets also play a much broader role than many people realize.

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They contribute to public health by monitoring and controlling diseases that can spread between animals and humans.

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They help ensure food safety through the care of agricultural animals.

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And they can even be involved in research, advancing medical knowledge that benefits both animals and humans.

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Veterinarians practice at the intersection of animal care, human health, and science.

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Let's take a closer look at what vets actually do in their day-to-day work.

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At the core of the profession, vets diagnose and treat illnesses and injuries in animals.

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This can include anything from managing infections and chronic conditions to performing surgeries like spaying, neutering, or more complex procedures such as repairing broken fractures.

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They also administer vaccinations and medications and conduct routine check-ups and preventative care to keep animals healthy.

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In addition to direct treatment, veterinarians run diagnostic tests such as blood work or x-rays and other imaging to better understand what is going on beyond the surface.

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They educate pet owners about animal health and nutrition, behavior, and guide owners on long-term care.

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And while much of the work is rewarding, it also comes with emotional responsibility.

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Vets are often there during some of the most difficult moments for pet owners, including making compassionate decisions like humane euthanasia to prevent suffering and protect an animal's quality of life.

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When people think of vets, they often picture someone treating dogs and cats, but the field is actually incredibly diverse with many different career paths depending on the animals you work with and the type of medicine you practice.

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The most common type is a small animal or companion animal vet.

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These vets work with pets like dogs and cats and make up the majority of vets in private practice.

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Their work is similar to a primary care doctor.

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They perform check-ups, diagnose illnesses, do surgeries, and provide preventative care like vaccines.

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On the other hand, large animal vets focus on animals like horses, cattle, sheep, and pigs.

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Many of these vets work directly on farms or travel to their patients, providing care for livestock.

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Their work often includes managing herd health, preventing disease outbreaks, and supporting food production systems.

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Within large animal medicine, there are also more specific paths.

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For example, equine veterinarians specialize in horses, including racehorses or competition animals, while food animal veterinarians focus on animals raised for human consumption and help ensure food safety and animal welfare.

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Another growing area is avian and exotic animal medicine.

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These vets work with birds, reptiles, and other non-traditional pets.

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Because these species have very different biology and care needs, this field often requires additional specialized training.

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There are also vets who work beyond traditional clinics.

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For example, research veterinarians contribute to developing new treatments and advancing medical knowledge, while public health and food safety vets help prevent disease outbreaks and ensure that animal products are safe for human consumption.

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In addition to choosing the type of animals they work with, vets can also specialize similar to human doctors.

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Vets can pursue advanced fields like surgery, radiology, pathology, nutrition, or emergency and critical care, often requiring several additional years of training after vet school.

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While vets are the highest level medical professionals for animals, there are a few other roles in animal care that share similar duties but differ in education, responsibility, and scope of practice.

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Vets are responsible for diagnosing illnesses, performing surgeries, and prescribing medications.

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Vet techs, on the other hand, work under a veterinarian's supervision.

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They may assist by taking X-rays, administering medications, and preparing animals for procedures.

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Most vet techs typically need a two-year associate degree and must pass a licensure exam.

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However, they are not licensed to diagnose conditions or perform surgery.

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While vets provide medical care, vet assistants and shelter workers focus more on the day-to-day care of animals such as feeding, cleaning, and handling animals.

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They may help with basic clinical tasks but do not need a formal degree, as they do not diagnose conditions or make medical decisions.

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These roles typically provide on-the-job training.

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If you're torn between human healthcare and animal care, here's a helpful way to think about how being a physician compares to being a veterinarian.

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Both careers require extensive medical education and share the goal of diagnosing, treating, and preventing disease.

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However, one key difference is scope.

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Physicians focus on humans, while veterinarians are trained to treat multiple species, each with different anatomies, behaviors, and health needs.

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Another major difference comes down to communication.

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Human patients can describe their symptoms, ask questions, and explain how they're feeling.

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Animals can't.

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Because of that, veterinarians have to act like detectives, relying on observation, physical exams, diagnostic tools like blood work or X-rays, and input from owners to piece together what's going on and make informed medical decisions.

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To apply to veterinary school, you'll most likely use a centralized application system called the Veterinary Medical College Application Service, or VMCAS.

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This platform is used by most veterinary schools in the United States and even some international programs, allowing you to submit one application that gets sent to multiple schools.

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The VMCAS application opens in January each year and deadlines are usually around mid-September.

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It's recommended to apply around mid-August so there's enough time for transcript verification and fixing any mistakes.

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Within the application, you'll need to complete several key sections.

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These include your personal information, academic history, and a detailed experience section where you document everything from veterinary and animal experience to research, jobs, and volunteering.

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There are four sections to the application.

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The first three sections open in mid-January, while the 4th section opens mid-May when you submit to schools.

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This section includes program-specific questions and essays.

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A competitive applicant typically has a strong academic record, especially in science prerequisite courses like biology, chemistry, and physics.

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Many admitted students tend to have a GPA around 3.5 or higher, showing they can handle the rigor of veterinary school.

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A strong science GPA typically falls in the 3.6 to 3.7 range, with your most recent 45 credit hours ideally showing an even stronger upward trend.

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Another major factor is depth and variety of experience.

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Vet schools are not just looking for applicants who love animals, they want students who understand the profession.

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Competitive applicants usually have extensive veterinary experience, such as shadowing or working with licensed veterinarians, along with broader animal experience like volunteering at shelters, farms, or research labs.

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What sets stronger applicants apart is diversity of exposure.

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For example, experience in small animal clinics, large animal care, research, or even public health shows that you've explored different areas of veterinary medicine and understand its scope beyond just pets.

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You'll also need letters of recommendation, typically around 3:00, and at least one is often required to come from a veterinarian.

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Strong letters from people who have directly supervised your work can make a big difference by highlighting your responsibility, communication skills, and readiness for the field.

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In addition to the main application, many schools require a supplemental application.

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These are usually shorter and more specific to the program, focusing on things like your fit for the school, residency status, or additional experiences.

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It's important to know that applying through VMCAS is not free.

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While fees can vary slightly each year, the typical application fee for VMCAS is $241 for one vet school and a fee of $132 for each additional school.

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There are also programs that can help cover application fees for students who qualify.

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To become a licensed veterinarian in the U.S., the required degree is a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, often abbreviated DVM or VMD.

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This is a professional doctorate that prepares you to practice veterinary medicine after you finish your undergraduate degree.

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It includes rigorous coursework, labs, and clinical rotations that build the skills you need to diagnose and treat animals.

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Most professional programs like this take about four years to complete after finishing undergraduate prerequisites in courses like biology, chemistry, and animal science.

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In contrast, a master's degree in veterinary science or related fields is usually a research-focused graduate degree.

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It's great for deepening knowledge in areas like animal nutrition, genetics, or pathology, but it does not qualify you to practice as a veterinarian because it doesn't provide the clinical training required for licensure.

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One of the biggest ways students get involved is through student clubs and organizations.

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At the UGA School of Veterinary Medicine, there are over 20 different clubs, all supported by the Student American Veterinary Medical Association Chapter.

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These clubs allow students to explore specific interests within veterinary medicine while gaining hands-on experience and networking opportunities.

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These clubs are incredibly diverse.

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For example, you can join organizations focused on specific animals like equine, bovine, or small animal medicine, or explore unique fields like zoological medicine, aquatic animals, or parasitology.

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Many clubs host wet labs, guest speakers, and workshops, giving students practical skills that go beyond lectures.

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There are also clubs focused on professional development and leadership, like business management or public health, as well as organizations centered on community impact and inclusion.

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This means students aren't just building technical skills, they're also developing communication, leadership, and teamwork, which are essential for becoming a successful vet.

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Another major opportunity is volunteering, especially through programs connected to the veterinary teaching hospital.

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A unique opportunity at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine is the CARES volunteer program, which focuses on supporting both clients and patients in the veterinary teaching hospital.

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The CARES program is designed to provide client support services, meaning volunteers help improve the experience of pet owners who may be going through stressful or emotional situations while their animals are receiving care.

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Rather than focusing only on clinical or technical skills, this program emphasizes the human side of vet med.

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Volunteers may help guide clients through the hospital process, offer comfort, and create a more supportive environment during visits.

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In addition to volunteering, UGA offers opportunities to get involved in research and hands-on learning through the College of Veterinary Medicine.

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A standout opportunity at UGA is the Infectious Disease Undergraduate Research Program, which allows students to get directly involved in real scientific research while still an undergrad.

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This program is designed for students pursuing bachelor's degrees who are interested in topics like viruses, bacteria, parasites, and how diseases spread between animals and humans.

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It connects students with faculty mentors and the Department of Infectious Diseases where they can work in active research labs.

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To participate, students typically start by reaching out to faculty mentors whose research interests align with theirs.

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Since each lab has limited space, this process teaches students how to network and take initiative.

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Beyond academics and experience, UGA also emphasizes community and support.

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Programs like peer support networks and student-led initiatives help students navigate the challenges of veterinary school while building strong connections with their peers.

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Whether you're exploring a specific specialty, gaining clinical exposure, or contributing to outreach programs, these opportunities help students grow into well-rounded and competitive future veterinarians.

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Think of it as building your starting lineup.

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Every experience adds another skill to your game and helps you stay ahead of the competition.

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The demand for veterinarians is projected to grow about 20% from 2022 to 2032 according to the U.S.

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Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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That's much faster than the average for all occupations.

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There are several factors that drive this growth.

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This includes an increase in pet ownership, higher spending on pet healthcare, advances in veterinary medicine and technology, and a growing need for livestock and food safety vets.

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While private practice for pets is the most common, there's also growing demand in emergency and specialty hospitals, public health, and food inspection agencies, as well as biomedical research and academia.

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Regarding work conditions, many vets work full-time, which may include nights, weekends, and emergency hours.

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It can be physically and emotionally demanding, especially when dealing with injuries or euthanasia strong communication skills and compassion for both animals and their owners are essential.

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In terms of compensation, the median annual salary for vets in the U.S.

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is around $110,000, though this varies depending on location, specialization, and type of employer.

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Despite the challenges, many vets report high job satisfaction thanks to their passion for animal care.

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People from many different academic backgrounds can pursue veterinary school as long as they complete the necessary prerequisites and gain clinical experience.

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It can be intellectually challenging, emotionally rewarding, and provides opportunities to make a meaningful impact on the lives of animals and the people who care for them.

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Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with your classmates, colleagues, or anyone interested in the field.

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Catch you next time on the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast.