

Veterinary Specialization in Spain: Evolution, Challenges, and Proposals for a Modern Professional Framework

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Summary

Veterinary medicine faces significant scientific, social, and regulatory challenges, and specialization has become essential for its development. However, Europe—and particularly Spain—still lacks a clear and coherent regulatory framework for veterinary specialization. This gap hinders professional recognition and allows the proliferation of unaccredited training programs, contributing to the continued migration of graduates seeking high-quality education abroad.

While the Anglo-Saxon model, rooted in university-based programs accredited by the ABVS (American Board of Veterinary Specialization), provides robust and structured training standards, Spain continues to operate without official recognition of veterinary specialties. This creates legislative inconsistencies, professional uncertainty, and a surplus of unregulated postgraduate offerings, despite the international prestige of Spanish EBVS (European Board of Veterinary Specialization) diplomate specialists.

To address this, a three-tier professional training framework—basic, intermediate, and advanced—has been proposed by the Spanish National Veterinary Council (OCV), aligning EBVS/ABVS diplomates with the highest level. Intermediate programs aim to respond to labor-market needs, but require strict oversight to avoid undermining the specialist designation. The profession's future depends on establishing a regulatory

model aligned with other health professions, ensuring rigorous standards, and strengthening professional unity.

1. Historical Roots of Veterinary Knowledge and the Need for Regulation

Veterinary practice, whose origins trace back to early civilizations, developed for centuries through empirism and individual expertise. As scientific knowledge increased, the need emerged for structured learning and quality control to ensure the safe transmission of professional knowledge.

A pivotal moment occurred in 1761 with the founding of the *École Nationale Vétérinaire de Lyon* by Claude Bourgelat. This institution marked the beginning of modern veterinary medicine—an academic, regulated profession grounded in science and public service.

As veterinary work grew more complex and increasingly commercial, regulatory mechanisms became essential for consumer protection and professional integrity. Although university degrees established a baseline qualification, rapid scientific progress created advanced competencies that exceeded the scope of general veterinary training, making structured specialization indispensable.

2. The Emergence of Specialties: Influence of the Medical Model

Modern medical specialties began forming in North America in the late 19th century, when groups of physicians with shared interests organized formal training and accreditation systems. Influential figures such as Abraham Flexner, Frederick Gates, and Sir William Osler drove reforms that standardized medical education, closed substandard institutions, and promoted excellence through rigorous accreditation.

This model later shaped veterinary specialization and inspired the MIR system used today in Spanish human medical training.

3. International Development of Veterinary Specialties

Veterinary specialization followed a trajectory parallel to medical specialization, though with some delay. The first American specialty colleges—veterinary surgery

among them—were established in the 1950s within universities equipped with the infrastructure and expertise necessary to lead scientific advancement.

In the 1990s, this model expanded to Europe, largely driven by European veterinarians trained in North America. Growth was rapid despite the absence of unified legislative support from the European Commission, demonstrating the profession's capacity for self-organization.

4. The European Context: Heterogeneity and Regulatory Challenges

Currently, Europe hosts 27 EBVS-recognized specialist colleges comprising 39 veterinary specialties. EBVS certifies training programs, oversees examinations, and advocates for the formal recognition of specialists across Europe. These programs are accredited by VetCEE (Veterinary Continuing Education Europe) and classified at Level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)—equivalent to a doctoral level and exceeding all other existing veterinary specialization pathways in rigor.

Nevertheless, substantial regulatory heterogeneity persists across European countries. Differences in culture, legislation, and administrative systems create confusion among professionals and the public, complicate mobility, and encourage the proliferation of unaccredited training options that cannot match the demands of EBVS programs.

This variability hampers scientific advancement and weakens the professional standing of veterinary medicine relative to other health professions.

5. Spain: Dispersed Excellence, Lack of Recognition, and Brain Drain

Spain is strongly represented in some of the world's leading veterinary centers, where many Spanish graduates excel in research, teaching, and specialized clinical practice. Yet many of these professionals work abroad due to limited domestic opportunities and the absence of a regulatory framework that integrates advanced training into the national system.

Despite being part of the health sciences under Law 44/2003, Spain does not officially recognize veterinary specialties. This contrasts with recent legislative proposals that

use the term “*specialist*” for academic selection processes, despite the absence of formal definition—revealing systemic inconsistency.

Professional organizations petitioned the Ministry of Health in 2021 to initiate the creation of veterinary specialties, but progress was halted pending the publication of another Royal Decree that never materialized. Without institutional action, the profession has had to create alternative pathways to structure postgraduate training.

6. The Professional Training Scale: A Profession-Led Proposal

After extensive collaboration between the Veterinary Professional Organization (OCV), specialist associations, and universities, a three-level professional training scale was introduced in 2024:

- **Graduate Level**
- **Intermediate Level**

Certificates organized by species, designed by the OCV, comprising 46 ECTS credits and recognized by VetCEE. The terminology has been carefully adjusted to avoid confusion with existing unsolicited credentials.

- **Higher Level**

Reserved for EBVS and ABVS diplomates, preventing duplication and aligning Spain with international standards.

This scale aims to rationalize the postgraduate training ecosystem and provide structured career pathways. However, if intermediate programs are applied too broadly or permissively, they may dilute the meaning of specialization and disincentivize pursuit of EBVS/ABVS credentials.

7. Semantics, Barriers, and the Path Toward Official Recognition

Ambiguities around the term “*specialist*” remain a significant obstacle, creating confusion among professionals and the public. Clear terminology is essential to safeguard consumers, ensure training quality, and protect the public interest.

Establishing veterinary specialties requires renewed dialogue with the Ministry of Health to formally adopt the training scale and align specialization with the broader framework governing health professions. The “One Health” paradigm—frequently invoked—cannot be meaningfully implemented without coherent development of both medical and veterinary professional structures.

8. Conclusion: A Call for Unity, Responsibility, and Professional Leadership

The future of veterinary medicine depends on the profession’s ability to shape its own development. Regulatory and educational frameworks must respond to sector needs rather than external pressures. While the growth of the veterinary industry in Spain offers opportunities, international experience shows that unregulated commercial expansion can erode professional cohesion and undermine public trust.

Veterinary medicine requires responsibility, ongoing learning, and mutual respect. Only through unity, scientific rigor, and strong professional leadership can the profession secure its role as an essential contributor to public health, scientific progress, and animal welfare.