



## Focus on animal welfare

Caroline J. Hewson

### Introduction

In October 2001, the Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre hosted its inaugural annual lecture in animal welfare. Dr. Mike Appleby, Vice President for Farm Animals and Sustainable Agriculture, Humane Society of the United States, spoke on the topic "What should we do about animal welfare?" (1). He concluded by saying, "But I can still give the single, one-word answer to the question, 'What should we do about animal welfare?' The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is 'More'." This and subsequent articles on animal welfare are a response to this challenge. They are intended to prompt discussion about the veterinary practitioner's role in animal welfare, to educate readers about animal welfare science, and to offer suggestions for promoting animal welfare in practice.



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### Why animal welfare now?

Animal welfare has been one of the top 3 priorities of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) for the last 10 years. This is significant because, owing to the higher standards of animal welfare that are being set elsewhere (European Union, restaurant chains in the United States), concern about animal welfare is likely to grow in Canada. In turn, the public may reasonably expect informed guidance from their veterinarians. However, this expectation may not necessarily be met, and the profession in Canada and elsewhere is beginning to criticize itself for understanding animal welfare too narrowly (as primarily health- and cruelty-related) and for failing to show leadership on broader questions of animal well-being. For example, in addressing the 2002 annual general meeting of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, David Watson, editor of the *Veterinary Times*, said, "Who amongst us can put our hand on our hearts and say that we really have been outspoken enough about the transport of live animals;... or who really believes it is appropriate as a profession for us to encourage the keeping of exotic species as pet animals; or to turn a blind eye to inappropriate breeding practices whilst at the same time carrying out expensive surgery to correct inherited defects?" (2).

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The views in this column do not necessarily represent the opinions of the CVMA.

Any failure by veterinarians to show leadership in animal welfare probably reflects some or all of the following: (i) the lack of veterinary education in animal welfare, (ii) the difficulty in assessing welfare, (iii) differing attitudes to animals within the profession, and (iv) some degree of conflict between veterinarians' vocation and their interest in making a good living. The last point is supported by independent observations from colleagues. For example, David Morton, veterinarian and professor of Biomedical Science & Ethics, University of Birmingham, recently suggested (Morton, personal communication, 2002), "The main way in which the veterinary profession fails to serve animal welfare is by not standing up and saying when they are unhappy about things, especially when it might upset their paymasters." A practitioner from Cardiff, Wales, expressed concern about veterinarians viewing farm animals (especially pigs, poultry, and sheep) as herds and not individuals: "I have witnessed a vet walk past a sow with a prolapsed uterus without even a mention, let alone any action, during a 'herd visit'. Generally viewing the profession as a service industry, in which the paying clients' views trump all other interests, worries me a great deal. I believe the vet should at least put some effort into advocating for the animal. The other parties to the contract are able to advocate theirs without the vet's help, but the animal is voiceless. Being more aware of animal welfare science would help with this, but sometimes knowledge is adequate and there is a lack of willingness or empathy." Similarly, in New Zealand, the profession has been examining how conflict between animal welfare and personal interests can constrain the individual veterinarian's advocacy for animal welfare (3).

Clearly, veterinarians have not failed completely to show leadership on questions of animal welfare. Many instances of leadership go unreported, but some areas that we know of in Canada include the CVMA's provision of expert advice on Bill C-10B (cruelty to animals bill) (4,5), recent commentary on the seal hunt (6), and the CVMA's Animal Welfare Committee and some of the CVMA's position statements (7). Other examples are the initiative of the Newfoundland and Labrador Veterinary Medical Association to provide education for children across the province on the humane treatment of animals (Dan Quinlan, personal communication, 2003), and the British Columbia Veterinary Medical Association's current examination of how to incorporate the World Small Animal Veterinary Association's animal welfare positions into practice management (Carol Morgan,

personal communication, 2002). These examples are very encouraging; however, with the improved understanding of animals provided by animal welfare science, the challenge remains for veterinarians, collectively and as individuals, to do even more for animal welfare.

### What else might veterinarians do for animal welfare?

The issue of what else veterinarians might do for animal welfare is not straightforward, but David Morton (Morton, personal communication, 2002) proposed these starting points: 1, differentiate the clinical signs of disease from other signs of poor welfare; 2, speak publicly about welfare concerns; and 3, participate more in the animal welfare movement as an **independent** voice.

Whether veterinarians take up these challenges and how they take them up are personal decisions. However, the case for a positive response is compelling, because veterinarians are the only animal-oriented group that is also a profession. No other animal-oriented group is invested with the same public trust, with its associated implications for leadership in issues of public concern, such as animal welfare. Despite this general respon-

sibility, veterinarians do not have clear guidelines for the extent of their role in animal welfare, but whatever veterinarians decide as a profession or as individuals, they must be knowledgeable.

### References

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