ANIMAL RIGHTS AND WELFARE
Veterinarians as perpetrators vs. protectors of animal welfare

South African veterinarians stand accused of unethical, immoral behaviour towards animals – of playing integral roles in the exploitation and abuse of animals in society – and of being poorly equipped to play leadership roles in discussions pertaining to animal welfare.

The incriminating paper, authored by a respected academic and presented at the South African Veterinary Association’s 9th Veterinary and Para-Veterinary congress in Gauteng in 2017, argues that veterinarians are inherently conflicted as the (direct financial) beneficiaries of the unethical practices that are deeply entrenched in (as primary examples) the livestock, wildlife and animal experimentation industries, which are all seen to exploit animals for human gain. Ms Michele Pickover argues that the concept of “animal welfare” (as contrasted to animal rights) is problematic, since it provides only a framework for basic animal care, while still allowing for routine, institutionalised and widespread animal suffering and abuse – i.e. it does not mean that animals are treated well. Instead, a commitment to the promotion of inclusive justice is advocated, for compassion and respect across the species barrier – to view animals as sentient beings and individuals – rather than as property or commodities.

These allegations made against the veterinary profession and related governing structures – as being perpetrators (i.e. transgressors) of animal welfare – has in turn elicited reflective commentaries by three respected South African veterinarians, which are overviewed below. The original conference paper and the three commentaries are linked for your reference.

Dr Joseph van Heerden considers the veterinarian’s responsibility towards promoting human health in ensuring food safety and food security, a role profoundly complicated by human population expansion in competition with all other living beings. It is argued that it is the involvement of veterinarians in the intricate interactions between many divergent life forms, that constantly adds to the stresses involved in difficult paradoxical decisions and philosophies – which may also fuel the perception of being in contradiction to the veterinarian’s generally perceived role as animal care-givers. The need for continuous, conscious reflection by veterinarians is emphasised, to remain respectful in their actions and guidance, to preserve the dignity of non-human life forms. Dr van Heerden points out that although the issues raised could be debated at length, the starting point of the differing points of view may be so divergent that a paper debate may be limited in what it could achieve.

Dr Quixi Sonntag concedes that it is time for the veterinary profession to reflect on its values with regards to animal ethics, since a critical evaluation of one’s own moral and ethical views is the first step to be able to deal with ethical dilemmas and think about welfare meaningfully. Veterinarians who do consider certain practices to be morally unacceptable, are placed in a difficult ethical situation: facing the choice of withdrawing their services (i.e. giving up their income and leaving the animals to their own fate) or being seen to condone unacceptable practices. How are veterinarians protected against unfair pressures in the workplace? Dr Sonntag advocates that veterinarians should confront areas where commitment to animal welfare has not been adequate, in a fair and transparent way, by placing the interests of animals first and foremost, i.e. the well-being of the animal should be at least of equal importance to the interests of people. Such an approach, if done in the right way, would engender respect from society and enhance the image of the veterinary profession, underscoring the importance of understanding others’ viewpoints (whether or not we agree with them). It is advised for the Veterinary Council to actively engage with these issues in terms of its oversight of the ethical conduct of the veterinary profession, including reform of educational designs, policies and guidelines where required.

Dr John Austin contemplates the purpose of Ms Michele Pickover’s presentation at the SAVA conference, and asks what truth there is in her assertions. None at all? A little? Much? It is concluded that the intention was not to attack or damage the reputation of the veterinary profession; but instead, “to promote introspection within the profession in the sense of motivating it to examine both individually and collectively the mental and emotional processes which guide the services which the profession renders to society, and whether there is in fact as Ms Pickover put it ‘disjuncture between society’s perception of the caring role that it presumes veterinarians play and the reality on the ground that is deeply conflicted and in some cases the perpetrator of problematic and unethical behaviour’”. Dr Austin recommends for the veterinary profession to recognise sentience in domesticated and wild vertebrate animals as a fact, to guide all thinking about these issues, i.e. animals feel sensations and experience emotions much the same as humans do; and to review what factors the profession might be overlooking or not affording proper consideration, in the position which it chooses to take on animal welfare – which may arise from
ignorance, insensitivity, indifference, influence (of educational or social conditioning) or self-interest. Freedom of expression is important, since balanced viewpoints can only be developed when a wide spectrum of opinion is heard, considered and adjudicated. Societal values and attitudes towards animals are changing, with an increasing sector of society who find the exploitation of sentient animals for human benefit to be a fundamental violation of the principles of justice, alerting the veterinary profession that it ought to constantly consider its position by keeping in step with advances and thinking in society if it wishes to retain its integrity, reputation and standing in society.

Where does this leave us then? Being a veterinarian is difficult. Most sectors of veterinary practice place huge emotional and psychological stresses on the veterinarian, who is required to balance the interests of sentient animals with the often-competing interests of humans. This often leads to cognitive dissonance, i.e. the mental discomfort experienced by a person who simultaneously holds two or more contradictory thoughts, beliefs or values. Being a fair adjudicator can seem impossible, yet decisions need to be made and actions taken. Are we adequately equipped in terms of building resilience to be able to function in a balanced way in such a challenging environment? Are we adequately equipped in terms of training in ethical decision-making? Should one choose to follow a utilitarian philosophical view, where the morality of an action depends on its consequences (i.e. the benefits of an action may justify the associated harms); or is it more appropriate to consider a deontological approach, where the morality of an action is based on whether the action itself is right or wrong? Alternatively, at the end of the day, is virtue ethics perhaps most crucial, i.e. where one’s moral character is emphasised, e.g. virtues such as honesty, trustworthiness, respect for others and empathy (i.e. how do we act when no-one is looking). Is it more proper to take a welfarist approach, where the protection of animals is emphasised in a system where human interests are prioritised over the interests of animals (which may be seen to legitimise or perpetuate certain unethical practices); or is it more proper to follow an abolitionist approach, where it is maintained that all sentient beings (human or animal) share the basic right not to be treated as commodities? The implications of the divergent moral philosophical views are far-reaching.

If you have read this far, it probably means that that you are interested in the topic and that this is important to you as a person. I would strongly encourage you to read the paper by Ms Pickover, to understand how public perception is evolving in terms of the moral status of animals, the concept of the dignity of animals and the intrinsic value of life (consciousness) – and how this can impact on public perceptions of the veterinary profession. Once you have done that, you will probably want to read the carefully considered veterinary commentaries.

Introspection is required on what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. Enjoy the journey!

Yours sincerely,
Dr Bert Mohr