COMMENT – DR J VAN HEERDEN

Do veterinarians act as perpetrators of inhumane acts towards non-human animals, or do they act as protectors of the rights of non-human animals? This was the subject of a presentation delivered at the most recent congress of the South African Veterinary Association (2017). The presenter did not hesitate to address (attack?) all aspects of the veterinary profession (i.e. education; industry; private and state veterinarians; the South African Veterinary Association; and the South African Veterinary Council) and used vivisection and the game industry to illustrate how far the veterinary fraternity has embarked on the road of carrying out harmful, immoral, and illegal acts towards non-human animals. Numerous generalities have been presented (some simply not true and others quoted totally out of context) and specific persons were mentioned. All issues could probably be debated at length, but I fear that the starting point of the different points of view may be so divergent that a paper debate will achieve very little.

Veterinarians in general not only deal not with non-human animals but are also intricately involved with other forms of living beings for example plants, insect, helminths, micro-organisms inclusive of viruses, bacteria, protozoa, and fungi. The veterinary profession has also been mandated with ensuring the availability of food for humans (food security) and promoting human health insofar as humans should be protected from food-borne ailments (food safety), and protection of humans from actions or infections forthcoming from animal-related sources. Hence some of the actions of veterinarians may be perceived to be in contradiction to their generally perceived role as animal care-givers. It is their involvement in the intricate interactions between different forms of life that continuously sharpens the veterinarians mind and constantly adds to the stresses involved in paradoxical decisions and philosophies. Perhaps the greatest challenge to veterinarians is that the care-providing role has to be conducted in a milieu where the patient becomes the prey.

The right of all non-human animals to live a life without hunger, thirst, discomfort, pain, injury, disease, fear, distress and to be able to express its normal behaviour is indisputable but the right not to be killed/murdered/slaughtered/shot for consumption is contrary to life and is debatable. To put it bluntly and to avoid euphemisms: It is a fundamental rule in nature that you either feed or you become food. To stop humans from eating animal products implies that other forms of life will be consumed. The provision of non-animal products seems to be condoned as an alternative to non-human animal harvesting, but the inability of humans to readily comprehend the reaction of for example, plants to harvesting, does not necessarily imply that they and other non-animal food providing sources are not also subject to stress-related actions. Besides, the mere fact that huge areas of land is needed to cultivate these non-animal food sources, impacts dramatically on considerable numbers of living organisms. The mere fact that human lives, whether sustained by non-human animal products or not, implies competition (competition for habitat, competition for food) with all other forms of life. The only way to effectively remove the deleterious human effect, is possibly to remove humans from the equation.

Competition is a given of life. Competition amongst living creatures inclusive of man, may often be brutal, determined and fatal. If veterinarians are then labelled as murderers, then surely murderers abound in nature. The mere fact that endorphins are produced endogenously in mammals probably underscores the ingenuity of unavoidable but a relatively painless death in a system that was designed to kill. Evolution favoured mankind and has been doing so for billions of years. Feeding is a sign of life and understanding such a fundamental concept of life requires investigation of many disciplines like psychology, physiology, biochemistry chemistry, endocrinology, genetics, enzymology and immunology. All these systems aim to support life by facilitating food intake and utilization. The lack of food has extremely serious negative consequences for all forms of life especially if a dominant form of life such as humans are deprived of food. Hungry people have little regard for conservation of other species and in general would even have less regard for the so-called rights of non-human animals. The veterinary profession simply cannot risk taking decisions that would negatively affect food supplies for humans. The subsequent effects on all forms of life may be catastrophic.
Perhaps a successful venture to save the earth and to maximize the logos of protection of living beings would be to, despite massive political and economic consequences, embark on a massive effort to control the growth of the human population. In the unlikely event of such an event happening soon, all that remains is for veterinarians to treat all forms of life with utmost respect and to kill with humbleness, adoration and reflection, and only when absolutely essential.

It remains, however, for the veterinary fraternity to constantly revise all codes, regulations, and guidelines pertaining to living beings in order to render a service befitting the profession and answering to the needs and rights of those they serve, and always in consideration of the effect of their actions on all other forms of life. Revision would also imply listening/considering the inputs from as many divergent sources as possible. I however, cannot see the veterinary profession promoting the dismantlement of practices like the wildlife industry, breeding and farming, but I am looking forward to the day when consistent efforts by the veterinary profession and mankind in general, to ban all actions that negatively impact on the dignity of non-human forms of life, come to full fruition.