Comment on Ms M Pickover’s presentation at the South African Veterinary Association Congress 2017

Note from the author:

This comment was written in August 2017 in response to a request by the registrar of the South African Veterinary Council (SAVC), to provide my personal input on the presentation of Ms Pickover at the congress of the South African Veterinary Association (SAVA) in July, 2017. This comment is specifically directed to said presentation and its main points as they refer to the veterinary profession, and is thus not a general discussion of animal welfare and the veterinary profession. As it was solicited by the SAVC, it is written with that perspective in mind, and offers practical suggestions for the SAVC to consider in response to some of the matters raised in Ms Pickover’s presentation. The format consists of short discussions of specific points made in the presentation, with my comment on each point, followed by suggestions to the SAVC.

1. Comment regarding the accusation that veterinarians support exploitation of animals and benefit from it financially

It is indeed true, in some instances, that vets are “deeply entrenched in the nonhuman animal exploitation industries, making income from them and reliant on them for income” as stated in the presentation. In most instances, veterinarians do not intentionally involve themselves in the unfair exploitation and abuse of animals, but some veterinarians find that in the course of their work, they witness practices that are not in the best interest of the animals when animal welfare standards are not met. There are, however, veterinarians who do witness unacceptable welfare practice and are willing to condone it.

Veterinarians who do consider certain practices unacceptable, are placed in a difficult ethical situation, facing the choice of either completely withdrawing their services (and as such giving up their income, and leaving the animals to their own devices), or being seen to condone unacceptable practice. It raises several questions, for example, to what extent are veterinarians who choose to withdraw their services based on ethical principles, then protected should the animals come to harm due to lack of veterinary services. On the other hand, in what instances are vets in fact enabling animal abuse, and what should be done about this? How are veterinarians who are bullied by their bosses into unwillingly condoning unacceptable practices, being protected?

2. Comment on the contention that veterinarians should not consider themselves the sole guardians of animal welfare

The argument that veterinarians are not, and should not be the guardians or doyens of animal welfare, is quite provocative but does have some validity, taking into account that not all veterinarians are ostensibly working in the best interests of animals as discussed above. As a profession, can we be players in the field and referees at the same time? The profession has to be able to prove its commitment to and expertise in animal welfare if it wants to lay any claim to “guardianship” of animal welfare.

However, we should also carefully examine this claim and deliberate on how wise it is to make such a claim. By claiming exclusive ownership of animal welfare, the veterinary profession can be perceived to be acting only in its own best interests and being intolerant of others who are experts in their own right. It may furthermore create an impression of possessiveness based in feeling threatened by others, whereas an inclusive approach as advocated by Ms Pickover signifies confidence and tolerance. The veterinary profession is likely to gain respect among other role-players in animal welfare.
welfare as well as in the public domain if it shares the guardianship of animal welfare with other stakeholders.

As a profession, we will have to be prepared to confront those areas where our commitment to animal welfare has not been what it should be and be willing to propose ways to work with others to improve in these areas. This would need to be done in a fair and transparent way, placing the interests of the animals first and foremost. If approached correctly, it would enhance the image of the profession.

3. Comment on the observation that the Faculty of Veterinary Science website creates a negative view of animal welfare

The wording of the Faculty of Veterinary Science website, as observed in August 2017, does indeed not reflect recognition of animals as sentient beings who deserve to be afforded respectful treatment based on their inherent value as living beings, as opposed to their commercial or functional value for humans. This reflects the need to move away from anthropocentric ways of referring to animals towards zoocentric approaches. We should indeed become more sensitised to the way words are used and what they mean to other people who see it from a different perspective.

4. Comment on the accusation that veterinarians promote vivisection

I disagree with the term “vivisection” as used in this dissertation. Dictionary.com defines vivisection as “the act or practice of cutting into or otherwise injuring living animals, especially for the purpose of scientific research”. The implication is that procedures on laboratory animals are done haphazardly, without analgesia or anaesthesia, when in fact very high ethical standards are maintained in accredited experimental facilities in South Africa. It seems disingenuous to use the word “vivisection” to describe animal experimentation in such a sensationalist manner.

5. Comment on criticism about the SAVC guideline document on animal experimentation

The SAVC guideline on animal experimentation is certainly in need of a review to reflect current facts and sensitivities. The issue is not so much with the content of the guidelines, except for the fact that it is dated, but how the points are made and how it is structured. For example, the current document starts out from an anthropocentric viewpoint, creating the impression that the benefit gained by humans from animal experimentation, is the most important consideration, when, in fact, it should be made clear from the outset that the well-being of the animals is at least of equal importance as the interests of people.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

There is no doubt that it is time for our profession to reflect on our values with regards to animal ethics. Our personal and collective views on animal ethics underly what we think and do about animal welfare. A critical evaluation of one’s animal ethics views is the first step to be able to deal with ethical dilemmas such as those outlined above. At the same time, we must understand (not necessarily agree with) others’ viewpoints, in order to strengthen our own arguments for our points of view.

The following are ideas which the SAVC may consider for the transformation of the profession with regards to animal welfare:

- Initiate dialogue and reflection within the profession and between the profession and external roleplayers to sensitise veterinarians to animal ethics and welfare. Debate the issues of ethical
dilemmas that vets are presented with and the issue of guardianship of animal welfare. Not only will this help individual vets critically analyse their views of ethics and welfare, and thereby develop more refined and informed views, but it will also assist Council in identifying areas where change may be necessary.

- Determine to what extent the current academic programmes for all the professions address animal welfare, how well it is aligned with current needs in the workplace (also compare with other countries) and recommend curricular reform where necessary.
- Support CPD activities relating to animal welfare.
- Initiate a review of the existing guideline on animal experimentation (as mentioned above).
- Clearly communicate the mandate of Council and where it has a right to intervene and where not, especially when engaging with the media and external organisations.
- Perform an audit of cases involving veterinarians in criminal activities relating to poaching etc, and report on the status quo in the interests of transparency.
- Investigate and report on how vets implicated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were in fact dealt with or not, in the interests of transparency.

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