INTERPRETATION AND COMMENT ON MICHELE PICKOVERS PAPER “PERPETRATORS OR PROTECTORS? WHY THE VETERINARY PROFESSION CANNOT IGNORE THE RIGHTS OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS.

John Austin, 19th June 2018

Introduction:

Almost a year has passed since this paper was presented in one of the Animal Welfare sessions at the 9th Veterinary and Para-Veterinary congress in Gauteng. The author of the paper, Michele Pickover is a well-known and respected animal justice activist and retired Wits University Professor who was formerly Principal Curator of the Historical Papers research Archive as well as the University’s Digitisation Centre.

She is the South African author of Animal Rights in South Africa, a pioneering book published in 2005 and was nominated for the 2006 Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction.

Currently she is the Director of the EMS Foundation, which works for the protection of the rights for children, elderly persons, wild animals and other vulnerable groups in South Africa and Africa, for the purpose of alleviating suffering, disrupting inequality in all of its forms, raising public awareness, empowering and providing dignity.

With these credentials she is well qualified to critically review and comment with rational argument on issues relating to the harms done to animals by human exploitation, to analyse their root causes and comment on some of the human interests that drive them.

It was for this specific reason that she was invited together with members of the NSPCA to participate in the Congress Animal Welfare sessions. That she chose the topic of her paper to challenge the veterinary profession’s perceived complicity in the unjust exploitation of domesticated and wild animals was to allow freedom of expression. Unjust, in the sense that part of the moral burden for this exploitation seemed to stem from double standards in what the profession professed to strive for on one hand and seemed on the other to ignore, in favour of economic and political imperatives. Her critical opinion was not an issue with the organisers of the Animal Welfare session for if we are to make progress in advancing animal welfare the discussion, opinions and debate around the matter from all interested parties ought to be considered and respected, whether or not they are agreed with. Furthermore, balanced viewpoints can only be developed if a wide spectrum of opinion is heard, considered and adjudicated.

Michele Pickover contributed positively to this debate in touching on issues relating to veterinary support of controversial animal use industries and posed the question of whether the public’s and profession’s perception of its propriety and ethical conduct in the work which it does, coincides with the high ideals which the profession aspires to in the Credo of the SAVA and in the Rules for professional conduct which are detailed in the Veterinary and Para-Veterinary Professions Act.
There is growing public awareness and recognition internationally that vertebrate animals are sentient beings with humans being positioned at the top of the animal kingdom only by virtue of its higher cognitive, communicative, and constructive abilities through tool use and materials and system development and design. These abilities have led to humans to exploit animals as commodities for human benefit on a scale in present times that has captured the attention of an increasing sector of society who find the abusive treatment of sentient domesticated and wild animals to be a fundamental violation of the principles of justice towards non-human sentient beings.

The challenge to the veterinary profession by Pickover is embodied in two paragraphs on the first page of her paper as follows:

“While the roots of the veterinary profession are clearly vested in the economic value of nonhuman animals, the 2014 Veterinary Council Code of Conduct document included a commitment to animal welfare. Interestingly this inclusion is not bound to the prevention of suffering. Claims to the discourse of “animal welfare” by and within and institutions, such as the veterinary profession ring hollow. This is because in many ways it is defined by the profit motive (because vets charge fees for their services) and it regularly works hand in glove with the abusive systems of production and in many instances propel it”; and

“Given the current training, curricula and the embedded nature of vets within abusive (animal) industries, many stakeholders believe that veterinarians do not have the proper tools and are in no position to provide leadership in issues dealing with “animal welfare”.

The question is what truth is there in her assertions? None at all? A little? Much?

It is not the purpose of this comment to agree with or refute the above opinions but rather to look what, if any significance, might this paper have for the veterinary profession and how the Veterinary Council might consider responding to it.

2. Significance of the Paper for the Veterinary Profession.

Perhaps the first aspect to consider is whether the paper was an attack on the veterinary profession. It was an invited paper to afford the delegates who attended the Animal Welfare sessions to listen to an opinion about the profession from a leading protagonist for human and animal rights (animal justice) in South Africa. We also trusted Pickover to deliver a scholarly presentation, which she did. It was delivered with personal conviction and sufficient factual evidence to make most of the veterinarians who listened to it feel uncomfortable and, in some cases, later to respond in protest in refuting of some of her assertions in discussion that followed.

Are the opinions expressed in of the paper damaging to the profession in any way? Not really, because the viewpoints and opinions expressed have, as it were remained in house, in that her written paper has only been circulated in a very limited way within the SAVA and SAVC.
As such it is largely a confidential document. If the author had wanted to attack the profession, then releasing it to the media would have exposed it to the Court of public opinion with potentially negative consequences for the reputation of the profession. This has not occurred and we should respect Ms Pickover’s integrity in this.

What then was the purpose of the presentation? If anything it was to promote introspection within our 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 she 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”.

Are her assertions valid and credible? Opinions on this are expressed by Drs J van Heerden and Q. Sonntag in the 14th MARCH SAVC Agenda, Annexure 24. That they are different gives us pause for thought.

There is also the statement from the Registrar Ms L Havinga to me that Council has not been able to conclude how to respond to Ms Pickover’s paper. In a sense this conveys a message that some introspection has already taken place and the complexity of the matter has probably been recognised as problematic and deserving of further consideration.

If this is the case then Ms Pickover has probably achieved her objective in alerting the profession that it ought to consider its position in the changing societal values towards animal justice worldwide and in South Africa. Her critical views also extend to the State’s approach in guarding and protecting the welfare of animals with outdated legislation ineffectual law enforcement.

3. What are the issues raised by Pickover that might be addressed by the veterinary profession?

Firstly, is the recognition of animal sentience in domesticated and wild vertebrate animals as a fact to guide all thinking about the issues raised by Pickover. They feel sensations and experience emotions much the same as humans.

Secondly, to review what factors the profession might be overlooking or not according due consideration in the position which it chooses to take on animal welfare. These largely revolve around the sources of unnecessary animal suffering arising from:

- Ignorance – maybe we are not as well informed about certain matters as we should be.
- Insensitivity – maybe we have become desensitised to some animal needs or lack empathy for production or wild animals through desensitisation to their sentience.
- Indifference – maybe we don’t care too much about the use of animals by society, good or bad because we are not responsible for what society does to animals.
- Influence of educational and social conditioning – maybe we have personal attitudes formed by our upbringing and education which we are reluctant to submit to closer scrutiny or to an interrogation of their ethics and fairness.
- Self-interest – maybe our thinking about animal welfare is influenced by financial interests and the need to be in harmony with our clients for business reasons, to the detriment of the interests of animals.
4. How might the SAVC respond to the Pickover paper?

This largely depend on whether the Council consider it to have any merit as an introspective prompt for considering its position in leading the profession in the current climate of attitudinal changes taking place in society towards animal exploitation for human benefit. It should be appreciated that the current status quo will be ultimately be forced to change by society and as this takes place the profession ought not to be out of step with such change if it wishes to retain its integrity.

It took considerable courage for Pickover to deliver her paper last year at a veterinary congress in a forum largely comprising veterinarians. I chaired the session and observed her stress and trembling as she did her presentation. She was also subjected to some robust differing veterinary opinions which questioned her viewpoints some of which were defensive of the profession more as a reflex reaction, rather than being based on critical disagreement with her overall thesis. She held her ground very well under this fire.

It might be courteous to write to Pickover and acknowledge that her paper has challenged the thinking of the profession and to thank her for this. She is not at war with the veterinary profession. She just has a contrary viewpoint about its position in society and its role as animal welfare agents.

The remaining question is whether or not it can be acknowledged by the Council, and indeed the profession that the Pickover paper has some merit for prompting further consideration about how veterinarians interact with the constituent public groupings which they serve. A further question for consideration might be how best to preserve the standing and reputation of the profession, by keeping in step with animal welfare and animal rights advances and thinking.

Although the profession can play a role in promoting and protecting the welfare of animals, it will always be a minor one in society. Our profession cannot dictate to society. The major changes must and will be brought about by society itself changing its values towards animals. Most of this change has come and will further come from animal justice (rights) activism. This is already having profound effects on first world societies, some of which is already filtering through to South Africa. Examples of this are the growing international move towards ethical tourism which have stopped most of the ostrich riding and elephant riding tourist venues last year and the recent threat to the mohair production industry from its target overseas markets closing due to covert filming exposing the goat shearing practices on SA farms by the activist organisation PETA.

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