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Animal Activist Urges Vets to be Activists Too

Henry Spira

Recently I had the pleasure of talking to the NYSVMS executive board about improving farm animal well-being and wanted to share some thoughts with readers of this newsletter.

The AVMA is to be commended for addressing the issue of lab animal well-being and for involving itself in the difficult problem of cat and dog overpopulation. Still, when we look at the entire universe of animal pain and suffering, it is the seven billion animals raised for food that account for 95% of animal misery. Unfortunately, veterinary expertise is more often used to maximize food production than to promote the well-being of farm animals.

In addition, there's the popular perception that laws protect farm animals from cruelty. But, in reality, farm animals are being subjected to ever more stressful confinement systems and have no legal protection, although society perceives that they do.

Change is in the air, however. Recent events underscore a rapidly-growing public interest in farm animal well-being. Both the American Meat Institute and fast food giant, McDonald's, have responded to public pressure by promoting the more humane treatment of farm animals. And, in response to more than 12,000 written comments, many from people outside the animal protection movement, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently banned hot iron face branding of steers imported from Mexico. The USDA is now organizing an in-house task force to examine the welfare of farm animals across the board.

Clearly, we're beginning to see structural change -- change that's inevitable because many farming practices have now become unacceptable to the public. The AVMA should marshal its credibility, experience, and expertise to hasten this process. Why? Because it's the humane thing to do and it's in the best tradition of science to question the routine and the traditional. In the past decade, in-vitro toxicology entered the scientific mainstream largely because leading toxicologists promoted the idea that change was both desirable and inevitable.

What can the individual veterinarian do? Above all, speak up on behalf of the animals. You are the professionals to whom government and industry turn for guidance. Tell them what they need to know: The public has a growing interest in the welfare of farm animals; yesterday's practices are not acceptable today.

Ask yourself: How would the public react to learning about and seeing these practices on the six o'clock news? Would you be comfortable with veterinary involvement? Treat every act as if you were working behind glass walls in the city square. Stand up and be counted in support of farm animal well-being. Encourage your professional organization to do the same.

An unpublished Tufts University study confirms that people become veterinarians because they like animals and because they want to help and care for them. In the words of the Veterinarian's Oath, they want to use their skills "for the relief of animal suffering." In fact, the Tufts study found that when asked to choose between serving their human client and helping their animal patient, veterinary practitioners nearly always favored their patient over the client.

In animal agriculture, however, the tendency has been to accommodate the client's economic interest by using veterinary skills to maintain health at the herd level while ignoring the individual animal's physical and behavioral needs. Changing public attitudes in much of Europe have provided veterinarians with opportunities to challenge this lack of attention to the individual animal. Similar concern in the U.S. is now providing the same opportunities here.

Veterinarians can help develop and implement alternatives to such stressful practices as the crating of calves and sows, the face branding of domestic cattle, the dragging of downed sick and injured cattle and pigs around stockyards, and the packing of horses into inappropriate double-decker cattle trucks where they suffer trauma and injuries on the way to slaughter.

A stated AVMA strategic goal is to establish itself as "a leader on animal welfare issues" [AVMA Membership Directory and Resource Manual]. How better to accomplish this than by taking an activist role? There's a button that says, "Wearing buttons is not enough!" Likewise, words need to be turned into action. Veterinarians have an enormous opportunity and responsibility to upgrade the lives of literally billions of suffering animals.

Reassessing outmoded practices will require major efforts. But don't we want to be able to look back and know that we've enhanced the lives of others? That we've reduced pain and suffering, not accommodated it?

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