

One Welfare, the role of health professionals, and climate change

Commentary on [Wiebers & Feigin](#) on Covid Crisis

Anne Fawcett

Sydney School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney

Abstract: Wiebers & Feigin argue that the COVID-19 crisis is a call for humanity to rethink our relationships with animals and the environment. This One Welfare approach has implications for the role of health care professionals and demands that we address climate change.

[Anne Fawcett](#) is a veterinarian and lecturer in the Sydney School of Veterinary Science. She co-authored *Veterinary Ethics: Navigating Tough Cases* with Siobhan Mullan. She is a member of the ANZCVS Animal Welfare Chapter and a Diplomate of the European College of Animal Welfare and Behaviour Medicine in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law. [Website](#)



1. Pandemics necessitate a “One Welfare” approach. Whereas people can be quick to blame animals for zoonotic disease transmission (Parry, 2020), Wiebers & Feigin (2020a,b) (W&F) correctly spotlight human behaviours, such as habitat destruction, overcrowding of animals in factory farms, mixing of different species in markets and an appetite for global travel (Wiebers and Feigin, 2020a). As a veterinarian, I am used to those in the medical profession discussing animals as “risks” to humans, but rarely the other way around. Importantly, W&F also recognise that “what is good for non-humans and earth is virtually always in the best interests of humans, given the profound interconnectedness of all life.”

Indeed, we benefit from the preservation of ecosystems and the maintenance of the planet’s biodiversity. This is consistent with the concept of “One Welfare”, which recognises the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human wellbeing and environmental sustainability (Garcia Pinillos et al., 2016, Fraser, 2016). Rather than seeking simply to manage risks posed by animals to humans, a One Welfare approach seeks to improve the welfare of all lifeforms.

One Welfare situates humans within rather than apart from nature. It recognises that the risks of zoonotic disease transmission can be reduced by preserving habitats or caring for animals in an appropriate, sustainable environment, ensuring appropriate animal husbandry, health and welfare. Importantly, it recognises that the health and welfare of those working with animals is also a matter of importance.

As Tarazona and colleagues pointed out, recognising our common biology has implications for how we treat animals: “Being aware of the improbability of life, its short duration and its fragility, we would assign more value to and have more respect for other equally improbable life forms. When making use of animals for food, work, or companionship, we could consider that each is a unique and unrepeatable life.” (Tarazona et al., 2019)

2. The role of healthcare professionals requires advocacy and activism. Covid-19 has overwhelmed the surge capacity of healthcare systems, infecting healthcare workers (Nguyen et al.) and leading to extensive discussion of the ethics of rationing vital resources including

ventilators (Emanuel et al., 2020, Litton et al., 2020). As W&F note, the medical community continues to undertake the physically, mentally and emotionally overwhelming tasks of managing the acute and chronic human health consequences of a global pandemic. However, it is also vital that healthcare professionals climb out of the trenches and consider the risk factors for this and future pandemics. As Eshel (2020) notes, “a long-term solution for COVID-19 requires fundamentally altering our interactions with livestock, wildlife, and indeed the entire natural world. More limited intervention would be as ineffectual as trying to combat the rise in Type II diabetes without addressing diet or inactivity.”

Health-care professionals, including veterinary team members, need to address health challenges not only at the level of the patient, but also at the level of the broader community, providing societal leadership to challenge the status quo where it has a negatively impact on health and welfare (British Veterinary Association, 2016). This requires advocacy and even activism.

I am used to health professionals campaigning about risks associated with smoking and obesity, but it is less common to hear my medical counterparts discuss the importance of our treatment of animals for our own health, wellbeing and ultimately survival. We know that human behaviour change is hard to effect. The more people appreciate that looking after animals and the environment is in the interests of their own health and wellbeing, the more likely they will be to make changes.

3. The elephant in the room: climate change. Whereas pandemics and antimicrobial resistance represent existential threats to humans and animals, the biggest existential threat to humans, animals and the environment is global warming due to climate change (Gills and Morgan, 2020). In addition to increasing the risk of heat related illness, global warming may increase the risk of infectious disease in animals and humans and even the risk of pandemics, for example, by leading to change in the distribution of insect vectors. In addition, climate hazards like wildfires, floods and hurricanes, increasing in frequency and intensity due to climate change, have already complicated the COVID-19 response in countries around the world (Phillips et al., 2020).

According to the journalist Eric Holthaus (2020), “climate change is a symptom of a distorted, imperialist worldview: the continued exploitation of the Earth is justifiable because humans exist separate from and can claim dominion over the environment.” Hence we continue to respond to global crises with a business as usual approach. But as W&F point out, “all that we do depends on abundant plant and animal life as well as clean air and water.” And the One Welfare framework reminds us that “we” includes animals, humans and the living environment.

4. Not a modest proposal. W&F call for us to “rethink our relationship with all life on this planet” -- a call that must be met with meaningful and radical action. In a society predicated on animal use and environmental exploitation, this will require a fundamental change in the way we eat, how and where we choose to live, and how we spend our time, as well as how our societies are governed. It will also require us to change the way we treat one another – including the most marginalised, vulnerable members of our society. We will need to step out of our comfort zones and give up some of what we might consider our personal rights and freedoms – like treating the world as a pantry stocked for our exclusive (over) use. To paraphrase Eric Holthaus, the only way to create lasting change is to create a future where everyone, and every living thing, matters.

References

- British Veterinary Association 2016. Vets speaking up for animal welfare: BVA animal welfare strategy. BVA.
- Emanuel, E. J., Persad, G., et al. 2020. [Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources in the Time of Covid-19](#). *New England Journal of Medicine*.
- Eshel, G. 2020. [Pandemic leadership failures and public health](#). *Animal Sentience*, 30(3).
- Fraser, D. 2016. What do we mean by "One Welfare"? *4th OIE Global Conference on Animal Welfare*. Guadalajara, Mexico.
- Garcia Pinillos, R., Appleby, M., et al. 2016. One Welfare - a platform for improving human and animal welfare. *Veterinary Record*, 179, 412-413.
- Gills, B. & Morgan, J. 2020. Global Climate Emergency: after COP24, climate science, urgency, and the threat to humanity. *Globalizations*, 17, 885-902.
- Holthaus, E. 2020. *The Future Earth: A Radical Vision for What's Possible in the Age of Warming*, New York, Harper One: An Imprint of Harper Collins.
- Litton, E., Bucci, T., et al. 2020. Surge capacity of Australian intensive care units associated with COVID-19 admissions. *Medical Journal of Australia*, Preprint.
- Nguyen, L. H., Drew, D. A., et al. 2020. [Risk of COVID-19 among front-line health-care workers and the general community: a prospective cohort study](#). *The Lancet Public Health*.
- Parry, N. M. A. 2020. COVID-19 and pets: When pandemic meets panic. *Forensic Science International: Reports*, 2, 100090-100090.
- Phillips, C. A., Caldas, A., et al. 2020. Compound climate risks in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nature Climate Change*, 10, 586-588.
- Tarazona, M. A., Ceballos, C. M. & Broom, M. D. 2019. Human Relationships with Domestic and Other Animals: One Health, One Welfare, One Biology. *Animals*, 10.
- Wiebers, D. & Feigin, V. 2020a. [What the COVID-19 crisis is telling humanity](#). *Animal Sentience*, 30.
- Wiebers, D. O. & Feigin, V. L. 2020b. [What the COVID-19 Crisis Is Telling Humanity](#). *Neuroepidemiology* 54(4): 283-286