International Conference on Veterinary and Animal Ethics

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It seems strange, given the importance of animal welfare since Ruth Harrison's Animal Machine nearly fifty years ago, that it has taken until now for an international conference on veterinary and animal ethics to be held. Stranger indeed in retrospect given what a success the meeting was; perhaps the time was just right for such a conference. The meeting, held at the Royal College of Physicians in London, spanned two days with the first covering more general issues in animal ethics and the second looking in more detail at the out-working of those concepts in different areas of animal use from wildlife, through laboratory animals, production animals, companion animals and animals used in sport. Finally, global and governmental issues were discussed together with broader aspects of ethical citizenship, ethics and economics and, you will be glad to know, the legal aspects of veterinary ethics.

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The meeting started with an excellent overview of the historical aspects of veterinary ethics in Britain by Dr Abigail Woods from Imperial College. The veterinary profession started as a small and fragmented body asserting its superiority over unqualified practitioners, seeking to show that treating animals ethically entailed putting them under qualified veterinary care. Woods suggests that this met with only qualified success. Parliament did pass the Veterinary Surgeons Act in 1881 giving qualified professionals a monopoly over the use of the term *Veterinary Surgeon*. But treatment of animals by unqualified people was still legal; curtailment of advertising by veterinary surgeons made it difficult for them to assert their perceived superiority over those who had not been to veterinary school.

Vets did have an important role in preventing such unethical and cruel practices such as the docking of the tails of horses but it look us many years to have the same consideration of the docking of puppy's tails. The 1912 Animals (Anaesthetics) Bill requiring anaesthetics for certain veterinary procedures, did not have support from the leaders of the profession, most probably because its lay promoters had failed to seek veterinary input from the start. At this point the majority of cases seen were horses, but the increasing importance of production animals did not go unremarked by veterinary surgeons. Woods notes Lesley Pugh commenting in 1924 "*Too often the cow becomes a mere machine for the provision of milk. As a result of our ignorance ... we fail sooner or later to maintain its efficiency*". It was to be another forty years before Ruth Harrison exposed this to public view and consternation in her seminal book, 'Animal Machines'.

The aftermath of the Second World War with its emphasis on increasing production targets worsened this scenario- albeit that British citizens had full bellies, the aptly named 'cheap food' policy - but the use of science and the increasing respect for professional expertise improved the vet's lot and the passage of the Veterinary Surgeon's Act in 1948 enshrined this in law. Having said this, the veterinary profession generally dismissed lay concern over factory farming as 'sentimental anthropomorphism' asserting the profession's moral responsibility for human practices but defining animal health, in an editorial in the

Veterinary Record from 1969, as the "*maximum economic production commensurate with economy and humanity*". Woods terms the period from 1948 to 1975 as "*the eclipse of animal ethics*" but by this latter date the Royal College's Guide to Professional Conduct offers the beginning of an insight into a change in ethical thinking among veterinarians. In 1975, the rationale for the Guide was "*preventing members from harming each other*" while by 1978 the rules were formulated "*with the interests of animals and their owners clearly in mind*". These changes continued until in 1987 a veterinary surgeon was removed from the register for performing treatment causing a pony unnecessary suffering and distress. In 1993, the College's surveillance over clinical practice extended to defining the docking of dogs' tails (which Woods points out had been debated since 1969) as unethical. Now the College has a certificate and diploma in Animal Welfare Science Ethics and Law and ethics and welfare are widely discussed, as this meeting shows.
We have spent much of this review

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discussing Dr Woods' opening lecture but this historical account was important in laying the foundation for the rest of the meeting. Next Professor Peter Sandøe from Copenhagen discussed the developing concept of animal welfare moving from the idea of cruelty to animals from as far back as Martin's Act of 1822 to ensuring 'no unnecessary suffering' as integral in British legislation in the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Considerations of animal welfare had moved from the Five Freedoms proposed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (now Committee) after the Brambell Committee of 1965 to FAWC's latest concepts of 'A life worth living' and 'A good life'. These concepts were further discussed by Professor Bernard Rollin from Colorado who underlined that pain and pleasure in the utilitarian calculus which lies at the heart of much animal welfare since Bentham's day were not sufficient to define what animals need. Pleasure and pain certainly matter to animals, but what about other 'matterings'? The concept of *telos*, the 'catness' of a cat, as we might put it: what matters to a bird is much more than just an absence of pain and a provision of pleasure. The ability to scratch and mark in a cat, even to hunt, the ability of a migratory bird to migrate at the right time of year, all should be central to our understanding of animal welfare. Central but also difficult to provide, I would say. One can ensure a freedom from hunger and thirst, but how does one provide the ability to hunt small birds without compromising their *telos*?! Rollin gave the fascinating example of servals in a zoo enclosure where provision of meat in a bowl in no way provided for their needs. Devising a machine that fired meat balls for the servals to 'hunt', as described by Hal Markowitz, Shirley LaForse in Applied Animal Behaviour Science back in 1987, might seen somewhat absurd but it worked! We might ask how such an understanding of animal behavioural needs can fit with out current

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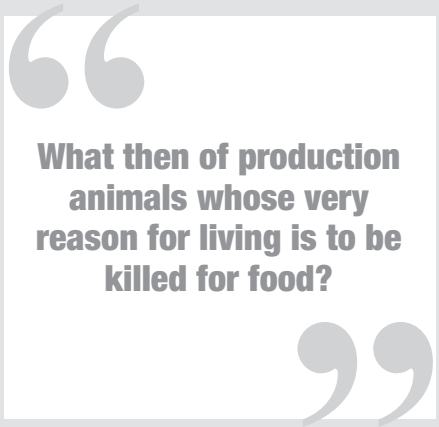
legislation, but the Five Freedoms enshrined in the Animal Welfare Act of 2006 include the provision in section 9.2(c) 'to exhibit normal behaviour patterns', which could easily include such enrichments.

Other lecturers in the first day covered areas from the use of Mepham's ethical matrix in analysis of animal use, the concept of justice in animal welfare, placing animal welfare in the context of environmental impacts and climate change and finally a debate on the question 'Is it better to have lived and lost, that never to have lived at all?' The vote was in favour of the motion but a substantial minority abstained.

The second day focussed more on the practical outworking of these theoretical ethical considerations, from our interactions with wildlife, the use of animals in laboratory science, the ownership of companion animals, the use of production animals through to the use of animals in sport. Are veterinary ethics compatible with the use of animals in research, where some of the animals will be bred and reared with the express purpose of causing some degree of harm for the benefit not of the animals themselves but of scientific advance or drug development? Utilitarianism is the key ethical background to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 while the banning of great apes in research in1997 and through article 8 of EU directive 2010/63/EU has a more deontological foundation unless, with article 55, 'exceptional and scientifically justifiable reasons'

become evident. More widely UK legislation requires suffering to be minimised by using 'animals that have the lowest degree of neurophysiological sensitivity' echoing Marshall Halls's Five Principles as long ago as 1871. The 3Rs of Replacement, Reduction and Refinement proposed by Russell and Burch in 1959 are explicitly referred to in EU Directive 2010/63 where member states should "*contribute by research to the development and validation of alternative approaches*". How these benefits for laboratory animals will be influenced by improvements in the EU legislation for all member states which will potentially involve a watering down of UK law has yet to be fully assessed.



What then of production animals whose very reason for living is to be killed for food? The presentation at the conference focussed on the impact of ethical debate on the welfare of newborn animals, Non-therapeutic abortions of cows used to synchronise oestrous, calving and lactation across a herd was a significant problem as was the issue of what to do with male calves, unwanted and thus disposed of in many systems. Lamb and piglet mortality was another significant issue. Producing 11 or more piglets per litter yielded higher economic benefits even if at the expense of some neonates dying. But was this acceptable? Birth in the wild is hazardous too however, but how should that figure in our assessment of neonatal mortality in captive reared animals? It might seem that keeping companion animals, where care of the individual was much more important than in high-yielding production units. But ethical issues from the problems of animals used for sport and inbred pedigree animals whether by enhancement of some pet animals or over-treatment of others were all issues discussed both in the lectures and over coffee and tear between them.

For lawyers however, perhaps the most interesting paper in the second day would be that presented by Marie Fox from the University of Birmingham on veterinary ethics and the law. The day before Carolyn Johnston from Kings College London had compared veterinary and medical ethics, showing the dilemmas facing doctors after Harold Shipman and Alder Hey Marie Fox extended that to look at the problems with the Veterinary Surgeons' Act of 1966 as it currently stands. The veterinary profession stands alone in being entirely self-related and having a disciplinary system that dates back to 1966 with the prosecutorial and adjudicative functions are vested within the same body. Appeals are heard through the Privy Council and the whole procedure can hardly be said to be transparent. Fox's paper deserves an article to itself in this journal but for several veterinarians in the audience, this reviewer included, was a stark wake-up call to the need for much further work by the Royal College, even if defra does not feel able currently to devote time and money to the reassessment of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

We then heard some insightful lectures on various aspects of ethics in practice. For example, Nigel Gibbens, the UK's CVO, reminded us of wicked problems such as bovine TB and told us that man's interests dominate any political decisions about the use of farm and other animals. Of course, this is no surprise but is nevertheless a stark reminder of our dominancy.

Finally, John McInerny gave a penetrating and incisive paper on animal ethics in the market economy. Considering that the market is not driven by ethical motives, McInerny suggested that the opposite was often the case with incentives all too common for an ethics-free market, as we have seen all too often in the banking and mortgage sectors in recent years. There is an opportunity for ethics to influence the market but that depends on the consumer with huge potential to drive the market and thus influence animal welfare. The whole conference, brilliantly organised and run, was inspiring and thought provoking. My only sadness was that the conference, open to all as it was, did not seem to attract members of what we might call the radical animal rights end of the spectrum. But as the organisers would no doubt tell us, this was the first International Conference on Veterinary and Animal Ethics – perhaps in future meetings opportunities will arise for debate across a wider ethical spectrum. As it was the meeting was stimulating and constructive, a chance to hear many key international speakers and to network with others holding animal ethics close to their heart.