



## The veterinarian's role in animal welfare

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**W**ord that you are a veterinarian will elicit various responses from people with different interests: a pet supporter will categorize you as a caring, efficient, knowledgeable doer; a farmer will categorize you similarly and add physical strength and endurance; a natural sportsperson will see you similarly and also expect you to have an intricate knowledge of each species; a person involved in the extremes of the animal welfare movement will be disappointed in your lack of passion for his or her own narrow agenda; and clients who have been faced with the bill for routine hospital or surgical therapy might well complain that the costs are excessive, if they are comparing them with the costs for human health care under a provincial health care program. Little wonder that veterinarians are usually reluctant to announce their profession at social events.

Besides the threat of being stereotyped from external perception, the veterinarian faces issues of internal perception, namely, (i) lack of veterinary education in animal welfare, (ii) difficulty in assessing welfare, (iii) differing attitudes to animals within the profession, and (iv) some degree of conflict between veterinarians' vocation and their interest in making a good living (1). The bottom line of all this negative perception results in a veterinarian being loath to take a leadership role in animal welfare issues.

Amendments to redefine animal welfare in the *Criminal Code of Canada*, when finally cleared from government wrangling, will end the ineptitude of current law but will immediately open the legal system for challenges from angles that were not possible when animals were "owned items." A new section is now proposed wherein an animal is a living being whose sentience is protected by the law of our humane culture. The essence of this law is enshrined in the 5 freedoms of the Brambell Report (2) as they have guided all humane legislation for the past 40 years:

*Freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition* — by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor;

*Freedom from discomfort* — by providing a suitable environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area;

*Freedom from pain, injury, and disease* — by prevention or rapid diagnoses and treatment;

*Freedom from fear and distress* — by ensuring conditions that avoid mental suffering; and

*Freedom to express normal behavior* — by providing sufficient space, proper facilities, and company of the animal's own kind.

Alterations to the *Criminal Code* are already being manipulated in the legal system. Court settlements for costs have increased dramatically beyond the "monetary value" of the animal to include pain and suffering by both the animal and the caregiver. Lawyers, facing the lack of education in animal welfare and purporting to set precedents as the new definitions are tested by individual cases, will immediately turn to the veterinarian as the obvious leader. Veterinarians make up the only animal-oriented group that is also a profession. No other animal-oriented group is invested with the public trust (1) and, as opposed to the animal welfare extremists, albeit operating with best intentions, veterinarians have the training and knowledge of the scientific approach.

As never before, veterinarians stand on the brink of leadership in animal welfare topics. If they fail to avail of this window of opportunity, I see only chaos of anarchy as the narrow agendas of animal rightists clash. To borrow the writing of Alexandre (Sasha) Trudeau in his coverage of the war in Iraq, "Canada's answer to a confused world should be legions of skilled soldiers of peace who bring order, hope and humanity where superpowers have trod"(3). For animal welfare, the veterinary profession should provide these legions of leaders representing an empathetic superpower.

### References

1. Hewson CJ. Focus on animal welfare. *Can Vet J* 2003;44:335-336.
2. Brambell FWR. Report of the technical committee to inquire into the welfare of animals kept under intensive livestock husbandry systems Cmnd 2836. Norwich: HMSO 1965.
3. Trudeau A. The Theft of Baghdad. *Maclean's* 2003;April 28: 18-22.

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