

One Health Une santé

Veterinary leadership: Time for us to step into our own power

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The year 2020 will be forever carved in the minds of mankind as a year that many will label as “annus horribilis.” It is the year that COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic (1). As the virus spread, it wreaked havoc on already weakened and fragile social and healthcare systems, in a manner that the modern world was not prepared to address. Yet all is not lost.

The pandemic has created something good from the chaos — the opportunity for the veterinary profession to break away from mainstream stereotypes and traditional roles and to show our contributions to society’s well-being. Traditionally, we veterinarians have shied away from our fundamental mission: collaborative leadership in integrative health. It is now time to step up into our own power. We have toyed with the idea for decades while unintentionally portraying ourselves as weak cousins to ‘real’ medicine.

Having many years of collective experience in epidemiology, outbreak response and relevant subdisciplines, we noticed early in the pandemic that the approach to COVID was seriously off the rails (2). In fact, a few years before that, we began noticing that this was the case for many issues in our profession — including antimicrobial resistance (AMR), Lyme disease, honeybee health — and many others, nationally and globally.

What is the fundamental problem? That’s easy — it’s a lack of coherent leadership. We live in a profession — and broader world — that is highly siloed. In almost every case, there is no overarching logical and well-organized process to lead and manage the networks to create effective solutions. It is time for a paradigm shift.

Beginning with honeybee sustainability in 2014, we began aligning distributed network partners from academia, business, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the public at large, for coherent solutions to issues that appear intractable due to the lack of an effective overarching leadership

and management framework. What emerged was a process now called Community Network Integration (CNI) (3). It has been described in detail (4). In brief, it consists of a combination of business process and social psychology designed to move distributed networks from a state of perpetual ‘swirl’ to coherent effective action to create solutions to ‘wicked’ problems.

Using CNI, we began establishing the required initial leadership teams in 2015 to support development, integration, and rollout of scalable projects to address issues of relevance to Veterinary Medicine across Canada. Much of this involves identifying, supporting, and integrating relevant initiatives already underway across the country — many of them initiated by scientists, professionals, and individual citizens frustrated by the incoherent and disorganized approach from the established institutions.

When COVID emerged in early 2020, it was obvious that there was no coherent leadership (5) or plan to deal with the pandemic locally, nationally, or globally, and that we were about to enter a state of chaos (6). To those of us with experience in outbreak response, it was particularly evident that the fundamental tenets of outbreak management were being systematically violated, with disastrous results.

We began connecting with multiple key players in communities across Canada who immediately began to see the benefit of a collaborative leadership framework to institute outbreak response under established best practices. Those best practices are also well-described (7), and we have simplified them to what we call The Pillars of Outbreak Response:

1. Establish inclusive, transparent, and accountable **leadership teams**.
2. **Validate tests** for infection and disease and social and economic health outcomes and determinants; create a transparent and complete **data framework** with proper **analysis** to drive effective actions.

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- Institute evidence-based **treatments** (e.g., over-the-counter and generic products) and **preventive** strategies [e.g., air quality remediation, personal protective equipment (PPE), safe and effective vaccines that prevent transmission, etc.].
- Establish complete, honest, transparent multi-directional **communication** with all required parties, stakeholders, public and politicians.

Some of our initiatives under the Pillars include:

- Establishing leadership teams at the community level — and within communities of practice, including ones with direct veterinary applications such as food animal health, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), pet wellness, honeybee sustainability, and mental health.
- Undertaking collaborative action meetings, including a regional consensus conference on effective outbreak response; acquiring initial resources to fund pilot projects.
- Connecting with local politicians to discuss easy-to-implement improved COVID response strategies, and their role in doing so.
- Building a multi-partner alliance for evaluation of COVID tests, prospective research on antibody and antigen levels, and amalgamation into a transparent data framework with proper analyses to allow for outbreak management.
- Evaluating the literature on efficacy of COVID treatments and preventives — and working with partners in Australia to manufacture, in Canada, a safe and effective vaccine that blocks transmission, and undertaking scalable pilot projects for air remediation for viral transmission control.
- Development and implementation of a comprehensive communications process that is truthful, complete, and that fosters dialogue on all relevant issues for collaborative decision-making on solutions.

What does this mean for those of us in veterinary practice?

Once again, the key is cultivating our own leadership. Leadership can be developed in many ways — don't be fooled by complex and intensive practices. Oftentimes we are required to do more and more; let's take a pause in the businesses of careers and life and create some space and ease. One of the easiest ways to do that is through personal reflection. Here are a few questions to ask yourself to get that started:

- What is leadership to me?*
- Where have I seen good leadership and bad*
 - At work?*
 - In COVID?*
 - In myself?*
- What can I do to improve my own leadership and that of my profession, my community, and my country?*

Spend some time on this — and share it with your friends, family, and colleagues. After personal reflection, the next step in leadership development is generating dialogue. We'll have more on this in subsequent issues of the *CVJ* — including specific things you can do to make a demonstrable difference in your own life.

Guelph-Wellington has been established as the first community in Canada to develop comprehensive, integrated outbreak response according to The Pillars of Outbreak Response. Local politicians have been contacted to open initial dialogue and all have expressed a willingness to work collaboratively. Multiple citizens, businesses, professionals, government officials, NGOs and academics have been engaged and the initial overarching leadership team has been established. Subgroups are beginning intersecting pilot projects to address the elements indicated above. Media and social media have been engaged to spread the word and involve more people in the process. All of this is being done under a validated quality management system known as *The Box*. To our knowledge, this is the first community in Canada (and perhaps globally) to use principles of quality management to manage their affairs through direct citizen participation. We are actively scaling the approach now to communities across Ontario and Canada.

With the establishment of leadership teams in areas like agri-food, pet wellness, and mental health, we are reaching out to map the relevant networks, identify needs and solutions and the resources required to co-fund and enable them.

All this creates a platform in which, together, we can bring about effective solutions, not only for the issues of direct relevance to our profession, but to those of society as a whole — and even for future generations. No need to remain in the shadows any longer — time to step into our own leadership, and our own power.

For more information, check out the Novometrix website at <https://www.novometrixinc.com/> and the Canada Collaboration website at <https://novometrixr-ccc.com/> There you'll find information on how we're using CNI to create solutions for COVID and other issues, some more detailed information on leadership strategy — and ways to become more involved.

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