

Veterinarians of the future

Sahil Dhillon was joint winner of the NZVA Vet2011 veterinary student essay competition. Entrants were asked to describe what they believe will be New Zealand's needs of the veterinary profession over the next 20 years, outside that of veterinary clinical practice, and to describe what skills they believe future veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals will need to have to meet these needs. The following is Sahil's prize-winning entry.

In the past few decades we have witnessed significant changes in people's lifestyles around the world. This will continue and maybe even hasten in the foreseeable future as we move towards a more globalised, sustainable world. New Zealand would be no different from the rest of the world, and changes are already evident here. These will spawn a change in society's behaviour, understanding about living and non-living things, values, everyday decisions and interactions. Specifically, these changes will be reflected in what we think of farm and pet animals – how we treat and care for them. As veterinarians and humans, we will be a part of this society and have to adjust and, in some cases, maybe even guide this new way of thinking.

Animal welfare will be one of the areas that will reflect a change in society's way of thinking. Already there is an increasing polarisation between various elements in relation to how livestock are raised and treated. Such aspects of society will become even more obvious in years to come. Working in New Zealand, future veterinarians will have to show leadership on issues like these, especially those in which they are well qualified to give opinions. We, as future veterinarians, can play a pivotal role in helping government (and hence the public) make well-informed decisions that take into account the reality of the situation rather than pure public perception.

Such actions would have to be taken so as to benefit society as a whole.

Veterinarians have to be more assertive on such topics that are bound to be raised in the near future. New Zealand has always been a leader in animal welfare; this position is, and will be, even more crucial for agriculture exports. As veterinarians who are involved in every aspect of animal production, we need to protect and enhance this image of New Zealand agriculture.

Another product of human progress over the past few centuries has been global warming. As global warming-induced climate change becomes a reality, adverse climatic events are bound to become more frequent. This will also result in New Zealand becoming generally warmer than it has been at any time during its recent past. Combine this with increased international trade and travel and the threat posed by alien pests and diseases increases greatly. Thus biosecurity, which is already crucial for the health of New Zealand agriculture, will become even more important. As veterinarians, who have a frontline role during such events, we should play a proactive role in planning strategies both at farm as well as at national level to deal with any eventualities in case of disease outbreaks, adverse climatic events and so on.

As in most western societies, New Zealand is witnessing an increasing influx of skilled migrants from around the world. Although basic human values are similar the world over, certain differences still exist especially in attitude towards animals. These differences may be

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attributed to cultural and religious factors. Future veterinarians will need to be more culturally competent and should have a broad view. Euthanasia would be an example of a procedure not acceptable in many societies and these clients may not be willing to accept it as an option for their pets. We need to be aware of such things, and this will be crucial as we advance into a new world.

The concept of "One World, One Health" has been put forward in the past few years as a new mantra for the health of life on this planet. As this interdisciplinary and more holistic concept becomes more of a reality in coming years, veterinarians will play a bigger role in public health. As public and animal health becomes integrated we will need to become more involved in public education about animal health, welfare, zoonoses and so on. This will bring a new era of medicine and a new way of interacting with society. Our profession is one of the most vulnerable to such health risks, so veterinarians will have to be at the forefront of implementing such a concept.

All of this underlines the importance of the leadership that we will have to show both in and out of clinics. This leadership is essential for the benefit of the profession and society. Being in an influential position where we interact with people from every walk of life we need to act responsibly. This requires integrity, honesty and morals of the highest standard. It is important to maintain and enhance the position in New Zealand society that veterinarians have enjoyed in the past. Lifelong learning will be essential to the veterinarian of the future to ensure success both in one's field as well as in the care of one's patient.

There has never been a more exciting time to work as veterinarian. It's up to us to utilise the opportunities that will benefit us as veterinarians and society at large. ■