

Veterinarians as Animal Welfare Experts

Subjects: [Veterinary Sciences](#) | [Physiology](#)

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Veterinarians are animal health experts, and they have been conferred a leading role as experts in animal welfare. This expectation of veterinarians as welfare experts appears to stem from their training in veterinary medicine as well as professional contributions to welfare-relevant policy and law. Veterinarians are ideally situated to act as animal welfare experts by virtue of their core work with animals and potential influence over owners, their roles in policy development, compliance, and monitoring, and as educators of future veterinarians.

animal welfare science

welfare enhancement

veterinary education

veterinarian

animal welfare

Five Domains Model

animal welfare assessment

1. Introduction

As a result of their training, veterinarians hold primary authority and responsibility for animal health ^[1]. As an example, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) delegates the responsibility of implementing animal health and welfare measures to veterinarians in each member country; veterinarians are the only professionals designated ‘Competent Authority’ in the OIE’s Terrestrial and Aquatic Animal Health Codes ^{[2][3]}. Veterinarians are also called upon for expert commentary and knowledge of animal health during disease outbreaks e.g., ^{[4][5]} and are the first port of call for the treatment of sick or injured animals ^{[6][7]}.

By virtue of their role as animal health experts, veterinarians have also implicitly been conferred primary expertise in safeguarding animal welfare more generally ^{[2][3][6][7]}. This view of veterinarians as the predominant animal welfare experts appears to stem from their training in veterinary medicine, as well as professional expectations outlined in national and international strategies and laws (e.g., ^{[1][8]}), and by veterinary regulatory bodies e.g., ^{[9][10]}. For example, part of the OIE’s approach to improving animal welfare globally is to provide guidance “...to Member Countries in order to strengthen their Veterinary Services to enhance their capacity to implement animal welfare standards” ^[8]. Added to this, the New Zealand Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians expressly mentions that “*Veterinarians have a special duty to protect animal welfare and alleviate animal suffering*” ^[9]. The result of these increasingly common explicit references is that veterinarians are now often regarded as experts in animal welfare in many contexts and have special legal and professional obligations ^{[9][11][12][13]}. In addition to these obligations, veterinarians have a ‘duty of care’ to the animals under their care ^{[14][15][16]}. This duty extends to their clients, as the owners of the animals they care for. In a broader sense, veterinarians, as professionals are held to account by the wider public. There is an expectation that veterinarians will act professionally and use their skills for the benefit of both animals and people ^{[9][10][14]}.

While veterinarians are ideally placed to safeguard animal welfare, understanding of animal welfare, the ways of scientifically assessing welfare states, and expectations for animals' welfare have changed significantly over the last five or six decades [17][18][19][20][21][22]. This evolution of animal welfare as a scientific discipline in its own right has resulted from advances in veterinary, medical, behavioural, psychological, neurological, cognitive, and animal sciences [20][23]. The result is that animal welfare is now characterised more broadly and includes consideration of the mental experiences of animals, that is, how they experience their situation and life [17][18][19][20][21][22]. Health and nutrition, the historical focuses of veterinary training, represent only two of the domains that are considered in a holistic appreciation of an animal's welfare state [17][18][19][20][21][22]. In addition, there is a growing expectation that, to provide animals with good welfare, we must ensure that they have a wide variety of positive experiences, rather than simply eliminating negative experiences [17][18][19][20][21][22][24]. These changes in knowledge and expectations have led to greater expectations of veterinarians to safeguard and enhance animal welfare in broader ways.

2. Veterinarians Are Ideally Placed to Advance Animal Welfare in a Range of Contexts

Veterinarians are ideally placed to advance animal welfare in a range of contexts (Table 1) [12][13][25][26]. This potential results from their knowledge and training in veterinary science, their access to animals and their carers in a range of different contexts, their expert contributions to policy and law relating to animals and the public's trust in them because of their status as medical professionals [9][10][14][27][28][29][30].

Table 1. The range of contexts in which veterinarians are ideally placed to advance animal welfare and examples of the roles they do or could play in each context. Welfare protection refers to preventing or alleviating negative states; Welfare enhancement refers to promoting positive experiences.

Context	Role(s) of Veterinarians
Clinical work	<i>Welfare protection:</i> assessing, maintaining, and treating the physical state of animals under their care
	<i>Welfare enhancement:</i> encouraging opportunities for animals to engage in behaviours that they find rewarding by influencing and educating people in charge of animals
Expert advice	<i>Policy & law:</i> government and industry consult veterinarians for expert advice on new or updated laws and policies that impact animals e.g., Codes of Welfare
	<i>Media:</i> expert commentary on animal-focused stories
	<i>Legal cases:</i> of animal abuse or neglect
Compliance & monitoring	<i>Monitoring:</i> animal welfare verification at slaughter premises
	<i>Compliance & monitoring:</i> at rodeo and racing events, and for animals used in research,

Context	Role(s) of Veterinarians
	testing, and teaching
Tertiary education	<i>Training:</i> educating next generation of veterinary professionals

s in them being in situations of influence over animal welfare. Clinical veterinarians are responsible for the health and wellbeing of the animals under their care. This role is dictated as much by their training as by statements to this effect in Codes of Professional Conduct (e.g., ^{[9][10]}). Clinicians spend much of their day navigating interactions with their clients ^[14]. These interactions include recommendations about how animals are managed in a way that has the potential to improve their welfare. In this respect, veterinarians are welfare educators and information providers. Clinical veterinarians contribute towards protecting animal welfare (preventing or alleviating negative experiences) and have the potential to enhance the welfare of the animals under their care (promoting positive experiences).

As well as their primary role as clinicians, veterinarians work in a wide range of other fields and roles and thus have significant influence on animal welfare. For example, in many jurisdictions, veterinarians are employed as monitoring and compliance officers in slaughter premises where their role is to ensure animal products meet standards for the domestic market and those of export countries ^{[26][31]}. This involves verification of animal welfare and food safety requirements and certifying products for export ^[26]. They are animal welfare officers at research institutes and ensure research, teaching, and testing using animals is carried out in an ethical way ^[1]. They work for governmental bodies and are given special powers of authority in this role. As animal welfare inspectors, they may obtain and execute search warrants ^{[1][32]}.

Importantly, veterinarians contribute, through their roles in government departments, to crafting or revising the very laws and standards that regulate our interactions with animals. Others are called upon to provide expert input to these processes, both nationally and internationally ^{[2][3][33]}. In addition, veterinarians are often called upon to act as expert witnesses in legal cases involving animal cruelty or neglect ^[34].

These specialized roles illustrate just some of the ways in which veterinarians are fulfilling their role as animal welfare experts beyond the scope of clinical expertise. Veterinarians are also employed as educators to train the next generation of veterinarians, veterinary paraprofessionals (e.g., veterinary nurses and animal scientists), and animal scientists. In this role, they are uniquely positioned to advance the expertise of future veterinarians in animal welfare.

Overall, veterinarians have roles in protecting animal welfare dictated by legal and professional obligations, by a duty of care for animals and their clients, and by society in general (**Table 1**). These roles place veterinarians in positions of responsibility and authority when it comes to animal welfare. Therefore, there are expectations that veterinarians are competent and confident to act as animal welfare experts.

3. Conclusions: The Key to Advancing Veterinary Animal Welfare Expertise and Literacy Is through Initial Training and Continued Professional Development

In summary, for veterinarians to be positioned as experts in animal welfare science, they need to first have a holistic and contemporary understanding of what animal welfare is and how it can be scientifically assessed. Veterinarians also need to be motivated to engage with the broader disciplines of animal welfare (science, ethics, policy, and law) and empowered to act as experts in their daily lives. For example, clinical veterinarians need to be able to recognise animal welfare compromise and identify opportunities for welfare enhancement in the animals they care for. The Five Domains Model offers a comprehensive framework for including animal welfare science into veterinary science curricula. Acknowledging the already burgeoning veterinary curriculum, the approach presented here offers a way of integrating animal welfare science across existing curricula without significantly increasing content [25]. This Five Domains approach integrates, reinforces, and reframes animal welfare science in veterinary training to develop welfare literacy [25]. Ethical reasoning skills and knowledge of relevant laws and policies will add to this welfare literacy [35]. Such literacy can then be enacted by aligning this framework with human behaviour change theory [36] and communication skills training [37] to position veterinarians as animal welfare experts.

Herein have focused on veterinary training in the first instance to improve animal welfare literacy in the veterinary profession. There are opportunities to advance animal welfare training for veterinarians during their initial education (undergraduate or postgraduate veterinary curricula) and through continued professional development during their veterinary careers. Education is an important step to developing competence, which in turn assists with confidence and workplace satisfaction [38][39]. Appropriate animal welfare training for veterinarians could empower them to act as experts in their daily lives and advance their duty of care from two domains of welfare to all five.

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