

# **Hominum animalumque saluti**

*About the professional responsibilities of veterinarians*



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## **Summary**

Public expectations of the veterinary profession are shifting. Besides their concern for animal health, nowadays veterinarians are supposed to look after animal welfare and public health as well. In this thesis I will examine how the veterinary profession should respond to these changing and expanding demands of society and how the corresponding professional responsibilities can be determined. I will argue that to retain the mandate of society veterinarians will have to meet these expectations. Actually, to be a modern veterinary professional one has to be able to play all these different roles at the same time.

A complicating factor is that all these professional responsibilities of veterinarians can easily conflict. As I will explain by introducing two actual cases, veterinarians are for instance often expected to give public health interests priority above animal welfare. This causes moral dilemmas for veterinarians who have a moral obligation towards the animals under their care as well. I will explore a relational ethical perspective to address this issue. In my opinion the relation of a veterinarian with the animals under his care matters morally. From this I deduce that the priority of public health is not absolute. It is a matter of proportionality. Human interests must be convincing enough to justify the harm to animals

Besides this, I will demonstrate that with regard to responsibility conflicts of veterinarians we have created our own moral dilemmas. Especially the conflict between public health and animal welfare is generally caused by the way we treat our animals. In that case, pointing at the resulting animal suffering is not enough. To truly solve these dilemmas the context must be changed. In this respect, the responsibility of individual veterinarians is limited, inter alia due to legal boundaries and the impossibilities of the present structure of animal husbandry. I believe it is a collective and substantive responsibility of the veterinary profession as a whole to raise the necessary public debate to resolve this problem.

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## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1 Shifting public expectations of the veterinary profession

The veterinary profession is a regulated profession. Society has entrusted veterinarians with the exclusive right to treat and cure animals. In exchange for this right, society expects veterinarians to fulfil several societal duties. Veterinarians are required to safeguard animal health, animal welfare and public health. They are regarded as gatekeepers for these public interests. Besides this, they have to perform these tasks in such a way that the environment is least affected.

Traditionally the veterinary profession was focussed on animal health. Animals mainly represented an instrumental value and veterinarians acted primarily in the interest of animal owners. For this reason, veterinarians are essentially trained as healers. Since the 1960's people slowly acknowledged animals also had an intrinsic value. From there on, animal welfare became more important. Consequently, society was regarding veterinarians more and more as animal's advocates. Today, because of several zoonotic disease outbreaks and scandals in the food industry, it is recognized that animal and human health are very much entangled. In reflection of these developments society wants veterinarians to protect the public against the dangers of animal keeping and –production too.

### 1.2 Research questions

These developments show a certain shift in the public expectations of the veterinary profession. This raises the question how the veterinary profession should respond to these changing needs in society? In this thesis I want to examine several possible responses of the veterinary profession to these changing societal expectations and determine the corresponding professional responsibilities of veterinarians.

However, these different interests society wants veterinarians to protect can easily conflict. The traditional slogan of the veterinary profession in the Netherlands is *Hominum animalumque saluti*, which means as much as: for the wellbeing of humans and animals. It is probably not coincidental that in this motto humans are placed first. When push comes to shove, society seems to expect that veterinarians should give human health priority over interests of animals. But is this really as obvious as it may seem?

### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

By analyzing actual cases in which veterinarians encounter a conflict of public interests, I will explore the question what the professional responsibilities of the veterinary profession actually are? In my analysis I want to focus on the supposed predominant role of veterinary public health. I will therefore start my thesis with two examples that show how the responsibility for public health can conflict with other responsibilities veterinarians are supposed to have.

After these examples I will first explain what professional responsibility entails by examining theories about professionalism and responsibility. Then I will try to apply these theories to the veterinary profession. From there, I will sketch the different responsibilities society nowadays imposes on the veterinary profession. I will clarify that in conjunction with the changing attitude of society towards animals, the weight of the different responsibilities veterinarians have to bear, is also changing. From animal health, emphasis has shifted towards animal welfare and public health. Ultimately and in spite of the increasing moral status of animals, it seems that public health trumps all other interests. This would make veterinarians public health professionals as well. Most veterinary practitioners however, still think their main goal is keeping animals healthy.

By defining professional responsibility and analysing possible responses of the veterinary profession to the changing needs of society, I will try to answer the main question of my thesis. What are the implications of society's expectations for the professional responsibilities of veterinarians?

Finally, by examining conflicting responsibilities in the actual cases I used as introduction, I will try to define the limits of these professional responsibilities in relation to the expectations of society and examine how these limits can be determined. To do so, I will use a relational ethical view on professional responsibility.

## **2. Conflicting responsibilities in veterinary practice**

To illustrate the moral dilemma of the different professional responsibilities a veterinarian<sup>1</sup> has to deal with, I will delineate two real life cases. The first is focussed on veterinarians working in animal husbandry. The second describes an example in companion animal medicine. Both show the conflict between a veterinarian's responsibility towards public health and his duties towards the animals under his care.

### 2.1 No action today, no cure tomorrow

What if you are a veterinarian working in veal industry and you have to watch how calves are dying each day because you cannot use the necessary antibiotics? Could you justify these losses with reference to your professional responsibility as gatekeeper of public health? Or would you feel frustrated because it is your job to keep these animals alive as well? For Dutch veterinarians working with veal-calves nowadays, this dilemma is no thought-experiment but harsh reality.

Antimicrobial resistance has become a huge public health issue. Abundant use of antimicrobials over the last fifty years has created several multi-resistant strains of bacteria. As a result of this development, there is a serious risk that in the future certain infectious diseases like tuberculosis might become untreatable. Already, about 440.000 new cases of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) emerge annually, causing at least 150.000 deaths worldwide (WHO, 2012). If this trend continues, it could well be that we will return to the pre-antibiotic era when millions of people died each year because of bacterial infectious diseases.

According to the World Health Organisation, there are several underlying factors that cause antimicrobial resistance. Inappropriate and irrational use, in human – as well as in veterinary medicine, is an important one. While in the Netherlands the use of antibiotics in human medicine is low compared to other European countries, we are at the top of the list of usage in animal husbandry (Dutch Health Council, 2011). This has led the Dutch government to impose drastic measures that would reduce veterinary use of antibiotics. Their target is to reach a 70% cut in the use of antibiotics in animal husbandry in 2015, compared to the level of 2009 (Ministries of

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<sup>1</sup> Whenever I use the male form of the word *veterinarian* this includes female veterinarians as well

Health, Welfare and Sport and Economic Affairs, 2012). Livestock industry and veterinarians are facing a huge challenge to bring this about.

The veal industry is a big consumer of antibiotics. Because of the large scale of the Dutch dairy industry, traditionally we are confronted with hundreds of thousands of (useless) male calves each year. As a residual of dairy production, these male calves are reared for their meat that is mostly exported to other EU-countries. There are around 2000 veal farms in the Netherlands that keep approximately 1.5 million calves each year, which is 30% of total EU-production (Bakker et al., 2012). The calves are collected from different dairy farms in the Netherlands and surrounding countries. They are transported to the veal farms when they are at least two weeks of age and slaughtered between eight and twelve months, depending on the kind of meat the customers want. The first couple of weeks they are housed separately, later they are transferred to group housing. The young calves are collected from different farms and placed on a long-term (international) transport<sup>2</sup>. At this young age their immune system is not fully developed and they are very susceptible to infectious disease. This problem is strengthened when they did not receive enough maternal antibodies through the colostrum in the first days of their lives. This structure makes the veal industry highly predisposed for the onset of bacterial diseases in the first weeks after the calves have arrived. Respiratory disease and enteritis are seen in of 90% of all calves and make use of antibiotics unavoidable (RVAN, 2013).

For public health reasons, Dutch government is restricting the use of so-called second and choice<sup>3</sup> antibiotics. Amongst other measures, a visit of a veterinarian prior to prescription will be mandatory. Furthermore, usage of more potent third choice antibiotics is only possible after bacterial culture and susceptibility testing. However, infectious diseases in calves need rapid treatment. Otherwise these animals can easily die because of septicaemia. Besides that, there is a significant degree of antimicrobial resistance to the first choice antibiotics, the farmer is allowed to use without the veterinarian visiting the farm.

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<sup>2</sup> EU 1/2005/EG: maximum of 2x 9 hours with minimum of 1 hour rest.

<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands veterinary antibiotics are ranked according to their disposition to induce antimicrobial resistance like forming of extended spectrum beta lactamase (ESBL). This risk is the least when first choice antibiotics are used. Second choice antibiotics are restricted to cases where no appropriate first choice antibiotics are available. Third choice antibiotics are only allowed after susceptibility testing because they are of critical importance for human medicine.

Another complicating factor is that in animal husbandry the profit margins are narrow. Extra costs for management improvements or veterinary care are not incurred easily. Retailers and consumers are mostly not prepared to pay a higher price for their veal. And although that would help a lot, restructuring the whole veal industry would still be necessary to reduce the problem of infectious disease in young veal calves. To achieve this, the veal industry is forced to make structural arrangements with other partners in the production chain. Because this implies that costs would increase and a win-win scenario is not instantaneously obvious, until now only very slow progress has been made. In the mean time, stricter rules to reduce antibiotics in animal husbandry have led to high losses in the veal industry. In the period 2007-2012 the number of dead calves has risen with 50%, from 40.000 to 60.000 dead calves a year (Van Drie & Alpuro, 2013).

The whole situation leaves veterinarians with the dilemma that on the one hand they have to accept the public health interests involved, while on the other hand they struggle with their other responsibility to protect animal health and welfare. The thing that makes this dilemma even more pressing is that individual veterinarians are in some way powerless to improve the situation. Only a complete and structural change of the veal (and dairy) industry could solve the dilemma.

Another aspect of the issue is the veterinarian's own interest. One could say veterinarians have an incentive to maintain a status quo because financially they profit from this. On the other hand, veterinarians could play a big role in the change towards a more sustainable veal industry. For veterinarians working in veal industry, on the long term this last option is probably more attractive than no veal industry at all. In any case, veterinarians will have to justify their actions and they are not the only ones. A solution for the dilemma is more likely to come about when it is clear how the responsibilities of all parties involved are divided. This example makes clear why it is important for the veterinary profession to clarify (the limits of) their professional responsibilities.



## 2.2 A dog's life

Suppose you are a veterinarian and the police call you on you on Saturday evening. They ask you to come to the veterinary practice immediately because they need you to kill an aggressive dog. You jump in your car and fifteen minutes later you arrive, just before the police does accompanied with a two-year-old Flatcoated Retriever. Once in the consulting room, the police tell you they have confiscated the dog from a young family living in a town nearby. The dog has bitten the neighbour's youngest son in the face. Since this was not the first time, the police decided to take the dog away and ask you to put him to sleep. You have never seen this dog before but he does seem approachable and you try to comfort the dog while listening to the story. The dog allows you to give him a stroke although he is a bit nervous. The idea that you are supposed to euthanize this animal doesn't feel right. The police however demand you end the dog's life right now. So what should you do?

Aggressive dogs are a public health problem. In the period 1982-2006 each year one or two people died because of a dog's bite. On top of that, yearly 230 victims of dog-bites are hospitalized and approximately 50.000 patients are treated in first aid or by general practitioners. Children are more often bitten than adults. Most incidents take place in the surroundings of the house where the dog lives and often the victims know the dog (Council on Animal affairs, 2008).

A Belgian report showed that in 67% of the bite-incidents with young children, these incidents where provoked by the victim. Children are often not capable of interpreting signals the dog is showing correctly (De Keuster at al., 2006). They mistake an angry teeth-baring dogface for a smiling one (Hickney et al., 2010).

In this case the reason for the incident is unknown. Nobody else but the dog and the child were present when it happened. For the police the fact that this dog has bitten the boy for the second time is enough reason to ask you to euthanize him. As a vet you hesitate. On the one hand, you do not want to risk that this dog is going to bite a child again. Dog-bites in young children are often directed at the face and can leave nasty wounds. There is a danger these wounds leave ugly scars that will be visible for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, these bite incidents can cause posttraumatic stress as well (De Keuster et al., 2006). On the other hand, you also are aware of the fact that there can be many reasons why this dog has bitten the boy. There could be a lack of socialisation with children, it could be anxiety-induced

behaviour caused by a frightful event or the dog could have shown territorial aggression because the boy had entered the premises (Reisner et al., 2007). You ask for a court order, which should be issued when the normal procedure is followed. This question irritates the police in such a manner they start threatening you. They will file a complaint with the disciplinary court if you do not kill the dog immediately.

Again, the dilemma the veterinarian faces here is that perhaps, in the interest of public health, he would have to euthanize this animal. The risk this dog will bite again with even more serious consequences is real. As a veterinarian you do not want to be responsible for this. When you do not put this dog to sleep, you would feel responsible for a possible next incident. The pressure in this case is even greater because of interference of the police.

But society also expects of veterinarians that they safeguard animal health and welfare. Killing healthy animals without a pressing need, is generally not accepted in our society (Rollin, 1986a). In this case, what caused the dog to bite is uncertain. He might have been provoked. Perhaps the dog is afraid of young children because of a lack of socialisation. It is also possible children mistreated him when he was younger. Maybe when the dog is transferred to another environment without children, he will do fine. In short, it could well be that there are considerable human factors involved that caused this incident. So why should we kill this animal instead of looking for alternatives? And who is responsible for examining these alternatives? Is it the veterinarian, the dog owners or the police?

Another aspect of this case is that behavioural problems in companion animals are a major reason for euthanasia (Rollin, 1986b). However, most of these problems arise by the way we keep our animals. Is a lack of responsible pet ownership a good reason to kill a healthy dog? So the problem presented here is bigger than the concerned dog and the individual veterinarian who is confronted with the issue. It shows that a broader view on societal responsibilities and the role of the veterinary profession is necessary.

### **3. Veterinarians as professionals**

In this chapter I will explore what the concept of professionalism entails. With the use of several theories I will show different aspects of this concept. Subsequently, from the analysis of the concept of professionalism I will try to examine the connection between professionalism and responsibility. This is an important step in answering my questions about the (limits of) professional responsibilities of veterinarians in ethical issues within the public health domain.

#### 3.1 Being a professional

A professional is normally described as a person with special skills or knowledge, who is using these abilities to make a living. The term also seems to imply a certain level of quality or service. Certain characteristics are typical of a professional. Among those we can mention: an advanced educational background, a level of practical experience in a specific field of work, membership of a professional organisation with recognition of a set of professional norms and values, a need for continuous education and a kind of authorisation (Sandoe & Morgan, 2012).

The veterinary profession fulfils all of these criteria and veterinarians can therefore be labelled as professionals. To become a veterinarian you will need years of university education and training. Graduates are prepped to have so-called "day one" competence and skills. However, it will take several years of practical experience to be regarded a veterinary professional.

In the Netherlands, membership of a veterinary association is not mandatory but at the moment around 75% of all veterinarians has joined the Royal Veterinary Association of the Netherlands (RVAN). And although there is no official veterinary oath for all veterinarians, the RVAN does publish a Veterinary Code of Conduct, which is binding for their members (RVAN, 2010). Besides the general Code of Conduct, RVAN is also producing more specific guidelines for good veterinary practice.

In veterinary medicine, authorisation is an important factor for recognition as a professional. In the Netherlands a public authority appointed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs grants veterinarians the sole right to practice veterinary medicine. This means veterinarians can exclusively examine and treat animals, prescribe veterinary medicines and authorise certain animal health documents. To protect

public interests the government has established a disciplinary court where animal owners can complain about assumed veterinary misconduct.

### 3.2 Public interests

According to this line of reasoning veterinary medicine is a profession. But what makes a profession distinctive from other trades and services we normally call occupations? Why do we, in that sense, distinguish veterinary medicine (as well as human medicine and law) from other fields of work like real estate brokerage, car mechanics or hairdressing? After all, one also needs education and practical experience to perform these jobs. And there are associations and guidelines for hairdressers, car mechanics and real estate brokers too. An explanation for the distinction could be that traditional professions are providing important civil services accompanied by the conservation of certain public goals and values (Cleton, 1999). The profession of medicine, for instance, promotes public (and individual) health and law professionals watch over justice. In this manner, the veterinary profession is designated by society to safeguard animal health, animal welfare and veterinary public health.

In line with this, there are two more or less moral distinctions between professionals and people who practice other business as well. These involve the aspect of professional autonomy and moral competence (Cleton, 2009). Typical of professionals, in contrast to other workmen, is that they often encounter complex situations during the course of their work. Because not every case a professional has to deal with can be foreseen, they are sometimes forced to make decisions not prescribed by law and professional guidelines. Without precedents but often with conflicting interests and values, professionals need to have some autonomy to make decisions based on the quality of their personal deliberation and reflection (Carr, 1999). Only afterwards, professionals are accountable towards society for the decisions they made. To make these autonomous decisions in a deliberate and responsible manner, professionals need a kind of moral competence. Moral competence can be understood as the ability and motivation to deal with moral dilemmas in the light of professional principles, virtues and responsibilities and to make reflective decisions in difficult moral situations (Carr, 1999). The professional autonomy of veterinarians is also reflected in the Dutch Animal Law. What is considered to be good veterinary practice is not fully described in government regulations. It is up to the profession itself to define this.

### 3.3 Professionals and society

The special position of a profession like veterinary medicine follows from the public goals that society has entrusted veterinarians with. It's these goals or interests that form the legitimacy of a profession. Society has granted veterinarians the exclusive right to perform veterinary medicine. In return for this right the profession has the responsibility to protect and promote these public interests to the best of their ability. Cleton describes four arguments to underpin the responsibility claim society lays on the veterinary profession (Cleton, 2009).

First of all society defines the purpose of veterinary medicine. For different reasons, society takes an interest in animal health and welfare. These reasons are particularly instrumental. We want to keep our animals healthy and happy because we use them to feed us, to do research or to give us enjoyment and company. Furthermore, because of the fact that 75% of infectious diseases in humans is of animal origin healthy animals help us stay healthy as well (RIVM, 2011).

Secondly, there is also a connection between society and the veterinary profession on a moral level. The morality of society is reflected in the moral values and principles of veterinary medicine. This morality is culturally determined. Veterinary ethics is not a separate domain with its own values and norms but a differentiation in a certain area of ethics within society (Koehn, 1994).

Thirdly, veterinarians are experts in a certain field that is of importance for the functioning of society as a whole. Society relies on this expertise and is depending on it to protect the public interests the profession is responsible for. This creates a reciprocal responsibility for the profession to ensure the qualities of the services it provides to the public.

Finally, society has entrusted the veterinary profession certain privileges, such as exclusive rights to heal animals and professional autonomy, to be able to perform their role in society. This relation of trust should be taken into consideration by the veterinary profession. In order to retain their status as an autonomous profession, veterinarians have to take into account the expectations of society.

The question now is whether the profession can live up to all the expectations society lays upon them? As I will explain in the rest of my thesis, there are certain situations in which these demands of society are conflicting. Furthermore, there may

be limits to the scope of responsibilities veterinarians can bear. Before I will explore these questions, I shall first elaborate the concept of responsibility.

#### **4. The concept of responsibility**

When we talk about responsibility, there often is a connection with accountability. If we make somebody responsible for something, we can hold this person accountable when things go wrong. In reality the answer to the question 'who is responsible?' is often not so evident. The same goes for questions such as whether it is justified to hold somebody responsible or what the consequences are when somebody is responsible. Bolt *et al.* distinguish three types of responsibilities (Bolt et al., 2007).

##### 4.1 Various types of responsibility

The first type of responsibility that can be identified is *causal responsibility*. When a veterinarian does not administer a certain antibiotic to a veal-calve with a bacterial disease or when he euthanizes a seemingly aggressive dog, in both cases the concerning animals will die. There is a factual connection between the (negligence of an) act and that subsequent result. From this causal relation however does not follow that the person, who is causally responsible for a certain result, can be held morally responsible as well. The answer to the question if we can blame (or praise) this person for his deed, depends on the question whether we can actually attribute the act and corresponding result to that person. This is what is called *attributive responsibility*.

To determine if somebody has an attributive responsibility we have to look into the relation between the person's reasons and intentions and his action. Because antimicrobial resistance is a real threat to public health, government has imposed strict rules on veterinarians about the use of antibiotics in animals. In certain circumstances these rules make it difficult for veterinarians to prescribe the most appropriate antibiotics. When there is a higher loss of veal-calves due to these conditions, it seems unjust to blame this on veterinarians. So although in this case they may have a causal responsibility, it does not seem right to hold veterinarians morally responsible for the death of these calves.

There is a similar situation in the case of the aggressive dog. There is great pressure from the police to euthanize the dog immediately. The veterinarian is clearly intimidated by the command that is given by the police and feels he had no choice but to kill the animal. Again, it seems unfair to blame the veterinarian for the result of his action. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the veterinarian interference has caused the death of the dog.

A prerequisite for attributive responsibility, at least from a deontological point of view, is that the person that is to blame or praise performs the action him- or herself and does so voluntarily. Besides this, a person can also be blamed for inciting someone to perform a certain action or for failing to intervene and prevent an action. To judge people morally they have to be moral agents. That entails they must be rational and accountable for their own behaviour. Also the situation in which a certain action takes place can determine if we think somebody is morally responsible or not. There can be mitigating circumstances like a lack of knowledge or, in case of the veterinarian in the veal-industry, prevailing interests that provide an excuse for an otherwise wrong act.

Attributive responsibility entails that we can praise or blame a person for his or her actions. And although causal responsibility does not determine attributive responsibility, it is a necessary condition to hold someone responsible in an attributive sense. The question however, whether we regard a certain action as morally praiseworthy or objectionable, depends greatly on the theoretical moral framework we use. I will come back to that point after I introduced the last form of responsibility that is categorized as *substantive responsibility*.

When we say that veterinarians have the responsibility to protect animal health, we implicitly make a moral judgement about how veterinarians should act. This is an example of a substantive responsibility of the veterinary profession as a whole. Individual veterinarians, however, also have a substantive responsibility here. Being a veterinarian entails one has a substantive responsibility as individual professional to protect animal health. Society expects every veterinarian to behave in this manner.

Such a responsibility can often be rephrased as a duty. To understand what substantive responsibility means it helps to look at two important features. In this kind of responsibility the specific actions are not judged isolated from each other, like in attributive responsibility. There is also a certain attitude or virtue involved when we talk about the substantive responsibility of an individual or a group. Another aspect is that in case of substantive responsibility, we can hold a group accountable for the resulting situation, although maybe not all of the involved members of a group are individually responsible. There is a kind of collective responsibility which entails we can address the group as a whole when they do not



live up to their responsibilities. The care for animal health, animal welfare and public health, society imposes on the veterinary profession and its members, is the kind of responsibility we characterize as substantive. Substantive responsibility can have a moral connotation too, for instance when an individual veterinarian is acting against what is expected from a member of the veterinary profession.

#### 4.2 The moral consequences of being responsible

Suppose that you have an attributive responsibility for a certain action. What are the moral implications then? This is not an easy question and depends greatly on the moral framework that is used. A deontologist can judge a certain action totally different than a consequentialist. In a deontological approach a person's action will be blamed or praised on the basis of the intention of this action. When the act is right in a deontological sense then the result of the action itself is of far less importance. Consequentialists focus on the outcome of the action rather than on the intentions. In a utilitarian perspective an action is right when it leads to the maximum overall happiness.

In a morally pluralistic and democratic society like the Netherlands, we have laid down our moral values and principles in our laws. This is normally the first touchstone for moral judgement. But in case of professionals, law does not define many of the situations in which they have to make a decision. For professionals, like veterinarians, the threshold for mitigating circumstances is usually higher than for lay people. Society expects professionals to make the right choices in complex situations they encounter in their field of work. When it is questionable whether a professional can be held morally responsible in a certain situation, his actions are weighted against what a reasonable and competent peer would have done in this case. This is exactly the method of various professional disciplinary courts. They judge if a professional has acted against the standards of good practice in that profession, of which the principles are often described in a professional code.

#### 4.3 Allocating responsibilities in the described cases

When we use the different concepts of responsibility and apply them to the two cases I introduced, we can say that there surely is a causal responsibility but probably no attributive responsibility of the concerning veterinarian. Does this mean the veterinary profession as a whole can also reject responsibility in these cases? Or is there a substantive responsibility for the veterinary profession anyway? This

problem I will address in the next chapters of my thesis. But first I will explain how the expectations of society regarding veterinarians have changed during the last fifty years and how the profession has adapted to this.

## **5. Different expectations, different roles**

Thinking about veterinarians, many people imagine a figure like James Herriot. This charming personality was the star in the popular TV-series "All Creatures Great and Small" that was aired in the 1970's and 1980's. Here the veterinarian is depicted mainly as super-vet, a person who cures animals with miraculous medicine and heroic surgery. His main attention is directed towards the health of the animals under his care. He is an authentic service provider who is on call 24/7, ready to drive off to whatever animal needs his help. However, nowadays veterinarians are expected to do more than to cure animals.

### 5.1 From animal healer to animal advocate and public health professional

Round about the same period James Herriot was on TV, under influence of philosophers like Peter Singer (Singer, 1975) and Tom Regan (Regan, 1983) the public opinion on animal use started to change. By addressing issues like the moral status of animals and animal rights, society slowly opened its eyes for animal suffering in certain forms of generally accepted animal use. People gradually recognized that animal welfare was more than preventing animal cruelty. Maybe animals actually do have what Rollin called *telos*. Something he described as the essence or the purpose of a creature, for example the dogness of a dog or the pigness of a pig (Rollin, 1981). And perhaps we should attribute animals a kind of intrinsic value, which means they have a value on their own, independent from their instrumental value for us humans. This Kantian concept was even used by the Dutch Government in the considerations on their Animal Health and Welfare Act in 1981 (Keulartz and Swart, 2009). Society's view on animals and animal use has unmistakably changed since Singer and Regan published their groundbreaking books. This concern of society for better animal welfare was reflected in the way veterinarians were supposed to act. From there on, society expected veterinarians to be animal advocates as well as animal healers. For example, today individual veterinarians must report animal abuse and neglect to the proper authorities (RVAN, 2011). Besides that, they should educate people on responsible pet ownership (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2012).

In 2009 the Dutch Council on Animal Affairs published a significant report called: *Visibly Better, the veterinarians role for public interests* (Council on Animal Affairs, 2009). The Council noticed that besides animal health and welfare, the contribution

of veterinarians to protect public health has become more and more important. Since as stated above, 75% of emerging human infectious diseases is of animal origin it is widely recognized that veterinarians play a crucial role in the protection of human health as well. This insight has led to the origination of the One Health concept in 2007 (Kaplan et al. 2009). The continuous worldwide threat of pandemics with for instance Avian Influenza brought the American Medical Association and the American Veterinary Medicine Association to join hands. Under the motto One Medicine - One Health they launched initiatives for structural cooperation between veterinary- and human medicine in the interest of global public health.

### 5.2 The force field of interests

So the veterinary profession evolved from being a service provider focussed on animal health, to an animal advocate concerned with animal welfare and finally a one health professional guarding public health. Actually, a modern veterinarian has to be all this at the same time. Although a veterinarian's main interest may be animal health and –welfare, it is impossible to renounce the other roles. One has to be a service provider and run a business to make a living. But to retain society's trust and to keep the entrusted rights, the profession also had to look after animal welfare, public health and even the environment. To switch between these roles constantly and balance all these interests correctly, places a heavy burden on the shoulders of the individual veterinarian and on the veterinary profession as a whole. A complicating factor is that individual veterinarians themselves have different opinions about their professional role. Some see themselves as a technical problem solver and service provider others are intrinsically motivated by their contribution to animal welfare (Sandoe and Morgan, 2008).

To protect all these public interests veterinarians must operate from an independent position. The Dutch Council on Animal Affairs notes that because of simultaneous developments in society it is increasingly difficult for veterinarians to maintain this independence. They identify that there is a growing tendency towards reification, individualisation and empowerment of citizens. Furthermore, the scale of animal husbandry increases, which makes veterinarians financially dependent of fewer customers. Finally, there is more competition between veterinarians who operate in a fully free market (Council on Animal Affairs, 2009). The Council describes a field of

force between the different actors, where interests of society, animal owner and the animal itself, all influence each other (figure 1).

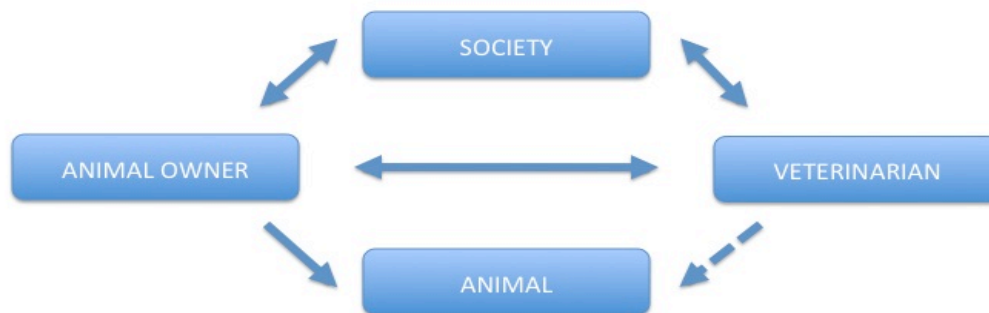


Figure 1.

In this figure, the animal is depicted as a subject because it has no influencing power itself. The relation between the animal and the veterinarian is mostly secondary, meaning it is indirect. In principle the veterinarian needs the consent of the owner to treat the animal. Although society in general has no direct relation with animals, within society there are opinions on how their owners should keep animals.

Veterinarians are service providers for animal owners and with respect to society they are supervisors of animal welfare and animal and public health.

The actors in this scheme all have their own interests (Council on Animal Affairs, 2009). Society as a whole wants the possibility to keep animals for safe food, company, hobby or sport. Furthermore, they want these animals to be healthy and without zoonotic diseases. Animal owners want to keep animals for their own specific purpose, sometimes to earn money and sometimes just for their pleasure or wellbeing. Veterinarians want to make a living and fulfil their professional ambitions. And the animals, let's assume they want a healthy and happy live. What exactly the latter means is subject of debate but it means more than to be free of hunger, thirst, pain and stress. It also involves a possibility to flourish, or like Rollin puts it to live according to their *telos* (Rollin, 2008). Anyway, the wellbeing of animals is hard to

capture. Ohl and Hellebrekers state that an animal is in a state of welfare when it is actively capable to adapt to changing circumstances and thereby achieves a state that the animal experiences as positive (Ohl and Hellebrekers, 2009). But there are other views on what constitutes animal wellbeing as well<sup>4</sup>.

### 5.3 Responsibilities and relations

As we have seen so far veterinarians have many responsibilities to different stakeholders. Sandoe describes the different relations a veterinarian has with the animal, animal owner and society as follows (Sandoe and Morgan, 2008). Sometimes the veterinarian has a direct relation with the animal under his care. This is the case when he is actually examining or treating the animal. Doing this job well or poorly directly influences the health and welfare of an animal. You can say there is a causal and attributive responsibility of the veterinarian towards the animal. In most cases however, the veterinarian can only treat the animal with permission of the owner. Although the veterinarian can influence the decision of the owner by giving him his expert opinion, it is ultimately the owner who decides what is going to happen. Here, causal and attributive responsibility for decisions at the expense of the wellbeing of the animal lies with the owner. When things turn out bad for the animal the veterinarian formally has no causal or attributive responsibility, provided he has done everything in his power to prevent this. But on the other hand he might have a professional responsibility to report cases where the owner withholds his animal the necessary veterinary care. Considered like this there might be an attributive responsibility for negligence on the part of the veterinarian?

Veterinarians can influence animal owners but also family, relatives or public opinion play a determining role in how the animal owners decide to treat their animals. The veterinary profession as a whole rather than individual veterinarians can provide public information and guidance on how we should treat our animals. The veterinary profession in fact has a substantive responsibility to raise public awareness on matters of animal health, -welfare and veterinary public health.

Yeates introduces another perspective on responsibilities of veterinarians. To clarify the responsibilities towards the different parties they have to deal with, he states

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<sup>4</sup> At the same time there is a comparable philosophical debate on the meaning of wellbeing in humans as well (Daniel M. Haybron (2008), *'The Pursuit of Unhappiness, The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being'*. Oxford: Oxford UP).

that a veterinarian as a moral *agent* has a responsibility towards an *object* (another human or animal) when he has a binding ethical reason to do something, based on his relation with that being (Yeates, 2009). Consequently, responsibilities of an agent towards an object are translated in the specific relationship between them. Yeates differentiates veterinary responsibilities in *agent-specific* responsibilities that apply to an individual veterinarian and *agent-neutral* responsibilities that can apply to all veterinarians. For example, because of his special knowledge and skills a veterinarian has other responsibilities towards an animal in pain than a layperson. The veterinarian in this case has an *agent-specific* responsibility to help this animal. On the other hand, we all have a general responsibility not to harm animals unnecessarily. Our society has an *agent-neutral* responsibility to avoid needless suffering in animals.

The same distinction is made between *object-specific* responsibilities towards an individual human or animal and *object-neutral* responsibilities towards all humans or (sentient) animals. An animal owner, for instance, has a responsibility to pay for veterinary care provided to his own animal but he doesn't have to pay the bill for other animal owners. He has an *object-specific* responsibility to care for his own animal. At the same time the veterinary profession has an *object-neutral* responsibility to provide good quality veterinary care.

The way both Sandoe en Yeates involve relational aspects into the question of veterinary responsibilities can also be applied to the two cases I introduced. The veterinarian working in the veal industry only has an indirect relation with the animals he is asked to cure. Maybe many infectious diseases amongst veal calves could be prevented when the management of the farm is improved. A better climate, higher quality of feed, improved monitoring of colostrum administration can attribute to the health of veal calves and prevention of infectious diseases. The veterinarian can give his advice but eventually it is the farmer who decides if these investments are made. However, in this case the farmer wants him to prescribe antibiotics, which is something the government prohibits him to do. The veterinarian has an agent-specific and object-specific responsibility towards the farmer and the calves under his care. The veterinarian has the responsibility to apply his knowledge and skills to the best of his abilities to provide optimal veterinary care to the animal of his client. The farmer is depending on his veterinarian to cure his livestock and pays him for this. At the same time, the veterinarian has an object-neutral responsibility towards public

health. By prescribing antibiotics that are supposed to be preserved for critical use in humans, he creates the risk of inducing antimicrobial resistance that can affect human (and animal) health. Clearly responsibilities are conflicting here and public health seems to trump all other interests in this case. However, this surely leads to animal suffering as well as loss of capital for the farmer in question and leaves the veterinarian with a moral dilemma.

The same distribution of responsibilities can be applied in the case of the veterinarian who is asked to kill a healthy animal. Here the veterinarian is more or less forced by the police to euthanize an assumingly aggressive dog. He can try to make his hesitations negotiable and influence the police to reconsider their command. The veterinarian has an agent-specific responsibility to give his expert opinion about the case presented to him. Furthermore, he has an object-specific responsibility towards the dog. In principle, killing healthy animals is something every veterinarian rejects. The evidence this dog is really a danger for society must be overriding. The life of the dog in this case depends heavily on the veterinarian's interference. On the other hand this veterinarian has an object-neutral responsibility towards public health. When he makes the wrong decision and does not euthanize the dog before he strikes again, he will be held responsible. The pressure of the police shortens the time to make a deliberate decision. Again, public health seems to weigh heavier than other interests and confronts the veterinarian with another moral issue.

Of course, other parties in these examples have responsibilities too. For the farmer and the police I could identify these different responsibilities as well. This thesis however, focuses primarily on veterinary responsibilities. So I will not go into detail on these responsibilities now. In the next chapters I will use the distinction Yeates has introduced to clarify the moral implications of the special relation between veterinarians and the animals under their care. Consequently, I will analyse responsibility conflicts of veterinarians and determine the possible limits of veterinary professional responsibility.



## **6. Relational ethics and veterinary responsibility conflicts**

As I clarified, a veterinarian has many different responsibilities. He has responsibilities towards animals, animal owners, society and last but not least to himself. On many occasions these responsibilities will conflict. It's up to the veterinarian then, being a professional, to weigh all these interests and make the right decision within the limits of the law.

### 6.1 The moral attitude of veterinarians

How a veterinarian approaches a moral dilemma is greatly dependent on his own personal worldview and corresponding moral norms and values. De Graaf described the prevailing discourses within the veterinary profession (de Graaf, 2005). He differentiates between four separate discourses, which should be understood as different ways veterinarians talk about their relation with animal patients and human clients:

- The supporter of the responsible farmer. This is a genuine service provider whose primary focus is on the client, who he normally trusts and supports.
- The animal's advocate. This type of veterinarian acts mainly on principle and in the best interest of the animal. He will refuse to do things that go against his principles as animal's advocate.
- The pragmatic veterinarian. He acts on basis of his intuition and always looks for the best possible solution for the circumstances.
- The professional. He is led by legislation and professional ethics rather than personal ethics. Sees it as his job to help the owner to do what is best for the animal.

Unfortunately, de Graaf does not connect these different discourses with a specific moral attitude or ethical theory. However, he does state these discourses do contain a kind of inherent morality. It seems that all but one (the animal's advocate) do not have a fundamental problem with animal use, although within this framework they try to promote animal welfare as much as possible. In general, veterinarians look for empirical solutions for their moral problems. Moral disagreement amongst veterinarians is often treated as a disagreement about facts, especially about animal capabilities (de Graaf, 2005). To solve moral dilemmas they usually do not use specific ethical theories, although consequentialistic arguments are often applied. In a study amongst veterinarians and veterinary students in Canada, Morgan found that

in general, veterinarians use consequentialistic methods like a cost/benefit analysis to determine whether the harms to the animal outweigh the benefits to the client (Morgan, 2009).

Most veterinarians accept general kinds of animal use like using animals for food production, sport or keeping animals as companions. Within these practices that as such are approved by society, they try to make a positive difference for the animal. For veterinarians working in animal husbandry, this moral viewpoint is much easier to hold on to than a non-consequentialist perspective like an animal-rights view, for instance. Generally these veterinarians do believe animals have moral status – albeit a lower moral status than humans - and their interests should be taken into account. Within such a view they consider welfare consequences for animals as well as potential benefits for humans. (Sandoe and Morgan, 2008).

Of course, not all veterinarians fit this picture. As seen above, some veterinarians see themselves as animal's advocates. This position could fit with a deontological perspective like an animal rights view. However, a very strict interpretation of the principle of equal rights for animals and humans creates many difficult moral questions for veterinarians working in practice. A common practice like neutering stray cats to prevent nuisance for humans would be unacceptable, for instance. There will also be veterinarians who do not recognize the interests of animals at all and regard them purely as instrumental goods. I believe nowadays this last group forms a minority within the veterinary profession. The fact that respect for the intrinsic value of animals is a cornerstone in both the professional Code of Conduct of the Royal Veterinary Association in the Netherlands (RVAN, 2010) and the Dutch Animal Law (Dutch Animal Law, 2011) underpins this statement.

## 6.2 Different approaches in veterinary ethics

The problem with a consequentialistic theory like utilitarianism is that striving for the greatest good for all stakeholders doesn't always settle the veterinarian's moral dilemma. Applying these kinds of arguments to solve the ethical questions in the cases I presented is, for instance, not very satisfying. In both cases ultimately the interest of the concerned animals has to be weighed against public health.

Reasoning from Singers principle of equal consideration of comparable interests for

all sentient<sup>5</sup> beings, the individual veterinarian has the difficult task to weigh all interests in play correctly (Singer, 1979). This can be very difficult because the impact of a certain action is sometimes hard to oversee and the weight of the interests at play is not always easy to determine. The dilemma of judging comparable interests could be facilitated by introducing a sliding scale for moral status on the basis of the level of sentience a living being is supposed to have. In this view humans are attributed a higher degree of sentience and thus a higher moral standing (Warren, 1997). From this perspective, in the end the scales will most likely tip towards public health. In many real cases this is probably true. Actually, although the starting point of Dutch Animal Law is that the intrinsic value of animals has to be protected, protection of public health is still the standard for many regulations on animals. But as we know, law does not always provide the answer.

This leaves the veterinarian in an unsatisfying position because how should he promote the interests of animals in a proper way? How should he fulfil his responsibilities towards the animal, the animal owner, society and to himself? It seems that besides consequentialistic arguments veterinarians need an additional perspective to make moral evaluations that do justice to all the responsibilities they have. Yeates has tried to give an alternative view on veterinary ethics by relating responsibilities to how specific they are to an agent (Yeates, 2009). His view is helpful in defining the different veterinary responsibilities. However, his analysis doesn't really give a definitive answer to the question how veterinarians should actually weigh conflicting responsibilities. Although he does demonstrate that in certain situations one responsibility could outweigh another, he provides no decision-making model nor gives criteria how to prioritize different responsibilities. In a case of animal abuse, for instance, Yeates believes the veterinarian's responsibility towards the animal should overrule the responsibility towards his client concerning confidentiality. A veterinarian should report a case of animal abuse to the relevant authorities despite of the relation of trust he normally has to maintain with his clients. But should veterinarians always give priority to the responsibilities towards their animal patients? Are the agent-specific and object-specific responsibilities towards the animals under their care always stronger than other responsibilities? I don not believe this to be true and will explore the possibilities of relational ethics in veterinary medicine a bit further to make this clear.

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<sup>5</sup> Sentience is understood here as the capacity to experience pleasure and pain.

Where in other animal ethical theories the focus is often on the (supposed) capacities of animals, like sentience or self-awareness, relational ethics also takes the relation between humans and animals into account. In this view our obligations towards animals depend strongly on the kind of relation we have with these animals. Our duty of care towards pet animals, for instance, differs from our obligations towards wild animals. Because we often have an empathic and caring relation with our pets, who we sometimes regard as family members, our obligations towards them are strong. We can say we have a positive duty to care for our companion animals. On the other hand our relation with wild animals is more remote. This does not mean we have no duty towards these animals at all. With regard to animals in the wild, our primary obligation is not to interfere and to respect and preserve their natural habitat.

In other words, a relational approach takes into account our relations with animals and the causal responsibility for the fate of particular animals that can be derived from that (Palmer and Sandoe, 2011). From this perspective there is also room for the special relation a veterinarian has with the animals under his care. I believe the relation of an individual veterinarian towards a specific animal that needs veterinary care, matters in a moral sense. These animals are in a way dependent on him. A veterinarian's professional responsibility requires him to give much attention to the health and welfare of the animals under his care. So, a veterinarian has a weighty (agent-specific) professional responsibility towards the animals under his care (object-specific). However, if we argue from a perspective of relational ethics veterinarians do not only have relations with animals. They also have relations with human beings. They have an object-specific relation with the animal owner, for instance, but also a more object-neutral relation with the rest of society. Furthermore, moral obligations derived from the relation between humans are mostly stronger than those resulting from the relation between humans and animals. Noddings states this is because our caring relation with animals is not as complete as our relations with other humans because of the lack of responsiveness<sup>6</sup> of animals to our care (Noddings, 1984).

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<sup>6</sup> This can probably be explained from the restrictions to communicate with animals and the corresponding difference in reciprocity.

### 6.3 Applying relational ethics to veterinary dilemmas of responsibility

Thus, balancing human and animal interests on the basis of relations will in many cases result in prevalence of the former. However, in my opinion this is not absolute. It is also a matter of proportionality. Human interests must be convincing enough to justify the harm to animals (Stafleu, 2012).

Of course, the outcome of this deliberation depends on how we think about the moral status of animals compared to the moral status of humans. From a relational ethical point of view our relation with other humans is often regarded stronger than our relation with animals. Consequently, I agree with Stafleu that when the stakes are high enough this interpersonal "loyalty" will most likely result in giving human interests priority over animal interests. In case of a serious zoonotic disease that threatens human health, we probably would justify killing the concerned animals. And if the risk was high enough, we would even accept the killing of healthy animals to control this disease. However, when human interests are minor and animal interests are considerable it is not evident that the former should prevail. In this perspective, culling healthy animals to control an infectious animal disease outbreak that is not dangerous for public health is objectionable. Reducing economic loss of animal husbandry, for instance, is not proportional to killing healthy animals. Especially when there are good alternatives to control the disease like vaccination. In short, the harm we do to animals must be proportional to the human interests in play. When this approach is applied to the two cases I have mentioned, the outcome could be as followed.

In the "veal calves" case there is a pressing reason to restrict the use of antibiotics. The problem of antimicrobial resistance is serious and urgent. The possible threat of resistant bacteria and untreatable infectious diseases has immense implications for humans as well as animals. The harm to relatively few veal calves can thus be regarded as proportional, compared to the possible harm to many (if not all) humans and animals. So, in this case the veterinarian should give priority to his responsibility for public health, despite his responsibility towards the individual animals and the owner. This conclusion is an example of what consequentialists would call "the lesser of two evils".

In the second case, ultimately the argumentation is alike. When the risk of serious human injury or possible death is high, the veterinarian should euthanize the animal.

However, an important factor here is that there is a degree of uncertainty about the aggressiveness of the dog. An alternative option would therefore be to hospitalize the dog until a behavioural expert has confirmed the dog really is a danger for society. Proportionality also entails that alternatives to avoid possible harm are explored.

This reasoning implies that, at least in the cases I described, there is no real difference between the consequentialistic approach, that is dominant within the veterinary profession, and the relational approach I introduced as an alternative. The outcome of the moral deliberation is more or less the same. In the next chapter, however, I will explain that there still is an added value of the use of relational ethics in limiting the professional responsibilities of veterinarians.

## **7. Veterinary responsibility for public health**

If we analyse the conflict between the professional responsibilities of veterinarians in the cases I presented, the most prominent contraposition is the one between the responsibility for animal health and welfare and the responsibility for public health. On the basis of consequentialism as well as relational ethics it seems that in general veterinarians should prevail public health above animal health and welfare<sup>7</sup>. This is in accordance with the regulations of the Dutch Animal Law that is a reflection of the dominant moral values in our society. When human interests are substantial, the majority of society will accept that the interests of animals are affected, even if this means these animals will die.

### 7.1 Underlying reasons of responsibility conflicts

However, the bottleneck is that at the same time in many situations these conflicts are caused by the way we, as a society, treat our animals (Verweij and Van den Hoven, 2012). In other words, we have created our own moral dilemmas. This is also the case in the examples I gave to introduce my premise. In essence, industrialisation of animal husbandry has caused the problem of high usage of antibiotics in veal industry. Factory farming itself is a result of a global agricultural economy where food prizes rule. Many retailers and consumers are seemingly not prepared to pay a little bit more for their meat and milk. This fixation on cost price compromises the welfare of animals because investments in, for instance, housing or management are in general considered not profitable. In a more sustainable model of veal industry there would be room for better colostrum management, food quality, transport, housing conditions, etcetera. This would improve the condition and health of the young veal calves in such a way that much less antibiotics would be necessary. So, basically to solve the veterinarian's dilemma a structural change in veal industry is required. This change has to be implemented by the veal industry itself, supported by retail, consumers, veterinarians and the perhaps the government.

In the case of the aggressive dog we can point to lack of proper socialisation of the dog with little children or insufficient puppy training. Maybe not enough precautionary measures were taken by the dog's owner to prevent the incident to happen. In any case, besides the possible aggressive nature of the dog there are many factors involved that could have caused this dog to bite. On the other hand,

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<sup>7</sup> The same could apply to other ethical approaches as well.

veterinarians are often confronted with behavioural problems in pet animals caused by ignorance of pet owners. I believe that when people decide to keep a dog as a pet they have certain responsibilities towards this animal. One of these responsibilities is to create a suitable environment and appropriate circumstances that will prevent these incidents as much as possible.

### 7.2 Attributing veterinary responsibilities for public health

An (feminist) ethics-of-care addresses this problem, because an important focus of this ethical approach is to look for the underlying cause of a moral dilemma in as well. To point at unjust animal suffering alone, is not enough. In this respect it differs from animal welfare approaches, like Singer and Regan, which are more focussed on fairness (rights and rules). Ethics-of-care leaves more room for the aspect of care, responsibility and relationships. Relational ethics in this form goes beyond compassion and tries to find out what or who is causing the harm and aims at changing the context to solve the dilemma. This contrasts with traditional animal welfare approaches in veterinary ethics that often fail to criticize the political and economical systems, which are causing the suffering (Donovan and Adams, 2007).

This point of view helps us to understand the complex of veterinary responsibilities better. It can build a bridge between the conflicting responsibilities of the veterinary profession and the substantive responsibility of the rest of society. Let me elaborate this thought a bit further.

As we have seen, individual veterinarians sometimes have a limited attributive responsibility. The special relation towards the animals under their care and their owners implies they have an important agent-specific and object-specific responsibility. This professional responsibility requires them to take the interests of both the animals and their owners into account. For individual veterinarians sometimes these responsibilities can sometimes outweigh agent-neutral and object-neutral responsibilities. This means that alternatives that mitigate animal suffering must be examined and promoted. Furthermore, the harm to animals must be proportional to public health interests. Thus public health is not automatically more important than animal welfare. Of course, when individual veterinarians make moral decisions in practice they have to act within the boundaries of the law. Within this legal framework individual veterinarians cannot be held responsible to achieve the impossible. As we have seen in the cases I presented there can be legal or other



reasons to give priority to public health interests at the cost of animal interests. The fact that there are certain factors that cannot be influenced by individual veterinarians means their attributive responsibility is limited. However, this does not imply they have to resign themselves to the situation. I believe it is their substantive responsibility to address the underlying causes that have led to the moral dilemma they are confronted with.

However, drawing attention to objectionable consequences of unsustainable animal use is not only a responsibility of individual veterinarians. Perhaps it is even more a responsibility of the veterinary profession as a whole. When confronted with these dilemmas, I think individual veterinarians have an object-neutral, substantive responsibility to notify, for instance, their professional organisation. The veterinary association then has an agent-neutral, substantive responsibility to make these dilemmas an object of public debate. This way, the necessary and structural change to solve the moral dilemmas of individual veterinarians can be set on the public agenda. Although I realize that there is a long way to go before we will really achieve this change, the veterinary profession can make a valuable contribution in taking the first steps here.

Finally, I want to mention another possible reason why conflicts between responsibility for animal welfare and public health are better addressed by the collective veterinary profession instead of the individual veterinarian. Somewhat in analogy with Gardiner's view on "moral corruption" in relation to climate change (Gardiner, 2006), there can be a problem with denying individual responsibility as well. There are similarities between the problem of climate change and antimicrobial resistance concerning the danger of evading individual responsibility. Just as in climate change there is scientific uncertainty about the causal mechanisms behind antimicrobial resistance and the contribution of veterinary medicine. Moreover, the relation between administering a single dose of antibiotics to a group of veal calves and the creation of a superbug is not very linear. Maybe, this could unintentionally lead to a lack of awareness of individual veterinarians that every single prescription of antibiotics does add up to a collective effect that could cause serious antimicrobial resistance. This advocates for a collective and substantive responsibility of the veterinary profession with regard to public health interests.

To bear this collective responsibility, the veterinary profession must be more than a loose collection of individual veterinary professionals (Bolt et al., 2007). Only if there is coherence between the actions of individual veterinarians, the profession can live up to the collective and substantive responsibilities society imposes on them. However, when individual veterinarians display unprofessional conduct and thereby renounce their responsibilities, the reaction of the media and the public is frequently to generalize this. Even if only a few veterinarians violate legal or professional norms, the veterinary profession as a whole is often addressed. In order to effectively respond to societal or political criticism, the veterinary profession has to be aware that "moral corruption" can exist. To avoid "moral corruption" of individual veterinarians the profession must strengthen its coherence. Professional guidelines on important topics like antimicrobial use or euthanasia could help.

This does not mean, however, that individual veterinarians can hide themselves behind the norms of the collective. Being an autonomous professional also entails that you are responsible and accountable for your own deliberate choices in the moral dilemmas you face. Of course, there is always room to deviate from the norm when you as a professional think it is necessary. With professional guidelines the motto is: comply or explain. In specific cases there can be compelling reasons not to follow professional guidelines. Furthermore, new scientific insights should lead to revision of the prevailing view. For this reason professional guidelines have to be the subject of continuous scrutiny and criticism of individual veterinarians.

In summary, the veterinary profession can collectively advocate the necessary structural change in animal husbandry in situations where the attributive responsibility of individual veterinarians is limited. To take up this collective and substantive responsibility also implies the veterinary profession, as a whole, is to a certain extent accountable when things go wrong. However, in these cases veterinarians cannot evade their individual responsibilities as autonomous professionals and they are accountable for their actions as well.

## **8. Conclusions**

Because of a change in societal expectations towards veterinarians, the professional responsibilities of veterinarians are expanding and shifting. This makes modern veterinarians more than just animal healers and service providers. Today, they are animal advocates and public health professionals as well. To retain the mandate society has granted the veterinary profession, veterinarians will have to meet these expectations. Actually, to be a modern veterinary professional one has to be able to play all these different roles at the same time. Being a jack-of-all-trades is not an easy task. Veterinary students have to be prepared and trained for this. In addition to their technical veterinary competencies they have to be educated in non-technical skills, like communication and professional attitude, as well.

Veterinary professional responsibilities have progressed from animal health to animal welfare and public health. Recently, there is more attention for the environment and sustainability as well. The challenge for veterinarians is to balance these different responsibilities and make the right decisions as may be expected of a professional. As I have showed public health interests are often seen as decisive, but I believe they are not absolute. At least the harm to animals must be proportionate to the supposed human interests. This entails searching for alternatives to avoid animal suffering as well.

My focus was on situations in which the veterinarian's responsibility for public health conflicts with other responsibilities, especially those towards animals. Solving these moral dilemmas with traditional approaches in veterinary ethics is not very satisfying. I believe the introduction of arguments from relational ethics can help. Although, when applied to individual cases the outcome may not be essentially different, relational ethics does go beyond the problem of animal suffering itself and addresses the underlying causes. This calls for a more pluralistic approach in veterinary ethics. In the complex reality of veterinary medicine, many times there will be a plurality of morally relevant features that will form the basis for the rightness or wrongness of actions. Moreover, because of the wide range of moral views within society and within the veterinary profession, it is not likely that applying one single theory or absolute principle, will lead to generally accepted moral judgements in the difficult dilemmas veterinarians encounter. When we examine the professional responsibilities of veterinarians concerning public health, applying arguments from relational ethics gives us valuable insights.

Veterinary responsibilities regarding public health are the domain of individual veterinarians as well as the veterinary profession as a whole. Both have a substantive responsibility to address the moral issues that the conflict between public health and animal welfare evokes. Individual veterinarians, however, also have a relationship with their animal patients and their owners. Because of this relationship individual veterinarians have an agent-specific and object-specific responsibility towards the animals under their care and their owners. Public health interests can outweigh the interests of animals and their owners. But individual veterinarians have a moral obligation to guard that the harm to animals is proportional with respect to the public health goal that is to be achieved. Looking for alternatives that can mitigate animal suffering without compromising public health is part of this responsibility. Inter alia due to legal boundaries and the structure of animal husbandry, attributive and substantive responsibility of individual veterinarians can be limited. In these cases there still is a substantive responsibility of the veterinary profession as a whole to address these conflicts between public health and animal welfare. Public health in this respect can be considered a more agent-neutral and object-neutral responsibility of their representative bodies. The same applies to animal welfare, of course.

However, the profession cannot solve these conflicts of responsibilities themselves. Because these conflicts emanate from expectations of society, the veterinary profession has to make them subject of public debate in order to resolve them. Moreover, the underlying causes of these responsibility conflicts often lie within the structure of our animal husbandry. Many times, the way we keep and treat our animals is the root of the problem. That is why I think that in the end it is also the substantive responsibility of society to find an appropriate solution for these conflicts between public health and animal welfare the veterinary profession has to deal with.

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