The History of Veterinary Ethics in Britain, ca. 1870–2000

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Abstract: This paper examines the history of veterinary ethics in Britain over the period 1870–2000. It lays aside present-day normative conceptions of veterinary ethics in order to understand how veterinarians in the past perceived this issue and the social, economic and political factors that influenced their thinking. This analysis reveals the changing nature and scope of veterinary ethics. Prior to 1948, when anyone could legally practice veterinary surgery, veterinarians argued that treating animals ethically meant placing them under veterinary care: The interests of the veterinarian, owner, animal and society were best served by ensuring full veterinary discretion in treatment. The state acknowledged this claim with the passage of the 1948 Veterinary Surgeons Act, which restricted the practice of veterinary surgery to qualified veterinarians. Veterinary ethical priorities then shifted to professional conduct. However, later in the century, as the social and economic climate grew more hostile to professional power and privileges, and animal welfare moved up the political agenda, veterinarians began to recognise potential conflicts in interest between animals, owners, society and the profession, and to navigate them using new forms of ethical thinking. No longer concerned with extending their power to treat animals, they focussed on the appropriate exercise of that power within the clinical encounter. Previously regarded as a matter of individual clinical freedom, how veterinarians treated animals became an ethical problem that attracted both professional and public concern.

Keywords: Britain, conduct, concern, ethics, ewe, owner, veterinarian, veterinary ethics, veterinary history, veterinary surgeon, Veterinary Surgeons Act, welfare
1.1 Introduction

Veterinarians have always encountered ethical dilemmas in the course of their work. The nature of these dilemmas and how veterinarians perceived and responded to them has changed over time. Focusing on Britain, from the late nineteenth century to the very recent past, this paper provides a preliminary analysis of these changes. Its short length precludes a detailed examination of particular ethical issues. Rather, the aim is to identify broad trends in how veterinarians conceptualised and approached veterinary ethics in their practice and politics.

There is little existing literature on this topic. Histories of medical ethics do not examine the veterinary field (Rothman 1991; Cooter 2002) and veterinarians rarely feature in histories of animal ethics, which focus on key thinkers, scientists, politicians and campaigners (Kean 1998; Guerrini 2003; Boddice 2009). Tannenbaum’s (2005) textbook on veterinary ethics does not attempt a historical account, while Legood’s (2000) is restricted to the history of animal welfare. Only Rollin (2006) engages seriously with the history of veterinary ethics. His purpose is to show that veterinarians have an under-developed sense of ethics. Drawing on lived experience in the USA, he argues that veterinary ethical concerns were traditionally confined to matters of professional conduct. Only in the later 1970s and 1980s did veterinarians respond – albeit belatedly and reluctantly – to society’s emerging concern for animal ethics.

This paper presents a quite different account of the history of veterinary ethics. Using a standard historical method to analyse documentary evidence, it aims to situate and understand veterinary ethics within its historical context. Instead of hunting, retrospectively, for the roots of present-day ethical thinking, it adopts a prospective view, in which veterinary ethics is regarded as whatever veterinarians at the time believed it to be. Their views are not judged against present-day norms or ideals but rather explained in reference to the broader social, political and economic milieu.

This approach reveals that while, as Rollin (2006) argued, professional conduct was a major veterinary preoccupation, veterinarians also had a long history of concern for animal ethics. The nature of that concern and the contexts in which it was expressed changed over time, as did the solution proposed. The first half of the paper reveals how, from the late nineteenth century until the 1948 Veterinary Surgeons Act, veterinarians worked to convince animal owners and the state that treating animals ethically meant placing them under veterinary care and ensuring full veterinary discretion in treatment. In the immediate post-war years, this ambition was largely achieved and the veterinary focus shifted to professional ethics. Later in the century, animal ethics returned to the forefront of veterinary agendas. However, it was now approached in a quite different way. Veterinary priorities shifted away from winning the power to treat animals towards the appropriate exercise of that power. Previously regarded as a matter of individual clinical
freedom, how veterinarians treated animals within the clinical setting became an ethical problem that attracted both professional and public concern.

1.2 Professional Conduct and the Relief of Animal Suffering, 1870–1919

For most of the nineteenth century, the British veterinary profession was a small, insecure and highly fragmented body. More of a trade than a profession, its members received a very basic level of training at the London-based Royal Veterinary College (RVC, established 1791) or William Dick’s school in Edinburgh (1823), before entering into the highly competitive field of animal doctoring. Reformers battled to improve the status and income of the profession and achieved some success with the 1844 foundation by royal charter of a corporate body, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). However, the RCVS was unable to abolish the competition posed by unqualified individuals, who often assumed the title ‘veterinary surgeon’ (Pattison 1984).

One strategy that veterinarians used to counter this competition was to assert their ethical superiority over unqualified men. They claimed that the latter inflicted cruelty on animals, while they were expert in relieving it. They carved out roles as expert witnesses in prosecutions for animal cruelty, participated in the 1870s campaign against vivisection and gave evidence on proposed legislation to improve the welfare of animals in transit. Supported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), they argued that much animal suffering could be prevented by substituting veterinary for lay intervention (Editorial 1876; Walley 1876; Poyser 1877; Discussion 1881; Harrison 1973).

If treating animals ethically meant placing them under veterinary care, then to encourage such behaviour on the part of owners and the state, the profession had to conduct itself in a particular way. Animal ethics and professional ethics were therefore linked. Using the medical profession as a model, veterinary reformers urged veterinarians to adopt gentlemanly habits, abandon trade-like practices such as horse dealing, and charge properly for services rather than relying on drug sales. Veterinarians should also improve their dress, stop advertising and behave considerately and courteously to fellow veterinarians instead of stealing their cases and badmouthing them to clients. Such reforms would enable the public to differentiate qualified men from fraudulent quacks (Woods & Matthews 2010).

These efforts met with only partial success. On the one hand, they helped to persuade Parliament to pass the 1881 Veterinary Surgeons Act. This gave veterinarians a monopoly over the title ‘veterinary surgeon’ and also formalised professional ethics by creating a register from which veterinarians could be removed for ‘disgraceful professional conduct’. On the other hand, unqualified practice remained legal and some animal owners and local authorities continued to preferentially employ unqualified animal doctors (Woods & Matthews 2010). The grassroots of the profession interpreted this outcome in different ways. Some claimed that the
standards of professional conduct were still too low for veterinarians to win respectable employment. Others, practising in rural areas, complained that RCVS strictures on advertising had left them unable to compete effectively with unqualified healers (Dellagana 1900–1901; Onlooker 1905–1906). The RCVS’s sympathies lay with the former view. Throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, it sought to set distance between the veterinary profession and other animal healers by policing professional conduct and prosecuting those who illegally assumed the title veterinary surgeon (Bullock 1927).

Meanwhile, veterinary attention was drawn to questions of animal ethics, such as the docking of horses’ tails. Justified on the basis that it prevented horses from getting their tails caught under the reins, docking was a routine operation usually performed without anaesthesia by veterinarians, farriers and horse dealers. During the 1880s, the RSPCA supported by RCVS President, George Fleming, proclaimed docking a cruel act, performed only for reasons of fashion and monetary gain. In the ensuing intra-professional debate, majority opinion held that docking should be judged on the basis of utility, not sentimentality. Veterinarians were the people best qualified to make this judgement and to perform the operation effectively and without cruelty (Editorial 1883, 1884; Correspondence and reports 1884). Consequently, the RSPCA had no reason to ‘plunge promiscuously into prosecutions, seriously interfering with rights and privileges which certainly ought to be enjoyed by respectable veterinary surgeons’ (Briggs 1885).¹

This belief that placing animals under veterinary care guaranteed their ethical treatment paralleled doctors’ concurrent claims about the ethical status of the doctor–patient relationship, which they invoked in an attempt to defend medical autonomy against threats from the laymen and the state (Cooter 2002). It manifested repeatedly in subsequent veterinary discussions. For example in 1910, when the RSPCA alleged widespread cruelty in the export of decrepit horses, members of the Central Veterinary Society concluded that the best means of preventing cruelty was to appoint veterinarians to supervise the trade (Central Veterinary Society 1909–1910).

The same thinking featured in discussions on the 1912 Animals (Anaesthetics) Bill ‘to make further provision for the prevention of cruelty to animals’. Brought before Parliament by Walter Guinness, MP, this sought to make anaesthetics compulsory for certain veterinary operations (Parliamentary 1912–1913).² While recognising that the bill would enable veterinarians to override owners’ resistance to anaesthesia, to the benefit of their patients, leading veterinarians nevertheless opposed it. This was partly because its lay promoters had failed to seek veterinary

¹The RSPCA did not agree and continued its attempts to secure the prosecution of a veterinary surgeon for docking (Editorial 1896–1897). The procedure was not outlawed until 1949.
²These operations included the castration and spaying of dogs and the castration and firing of horses. Local anaesthetic was required for neurectomy, enucleation and trephining. Although anaesthetics had been used in human medicine since the 1840s, the use of chloroform in veterinary surgery did not become routine until the turn of the twentieth century (Editorial 1905–1906).
input. Also, the bill would constrain veterinary freedom of action, and because it did not restrict anaesthetic use to veterinarians, it would enable untrained men to attempt it, resulting in poorly anaesthetised animals and much suffering (Correspondence 1912–1913; Hobday 1913–1914). These complaints had little effect, and in 1919, after several revisions to the schedule of operations, the bill became law (Memo 1918–1919). Although viewed as an overall advance in humanity to animals, leading veterinary surgeon and future RVC principal, Frederick Hobday, was not alone in feeling that, ‘It rather galls on the veterinary surgeon to be told that he is not to have it left to his discretion in all operations and we are apparently told that by the laity’. The best interests of the animal were served by placing it under veterinary care and granting veterinarians full discretion in treatment (Hobday 1919–1920).

1.3 The Ethical Nature of Veterinary Work, 1919–1948

Similar views of veterinary ethics were expressed repeatedly during the inter-war period as veterinarians sought to carve out new niches in agriculture and small animal medicine. These efforts were stimulated by threats to traditional sources of employment. Horse numbers were declining with the rise of mechanised transport; scientific thinking had shifted to favour preventive and hygienic measures over bleeding, firing and drugging; and veterinarians faced increasing competition from patent medicine vendors, whose advertising practices were not constrained by professional ethics (Onlooker 1905–1906; Woods 2007). 3

Veterinarians’ growing exposure to farm animals caused them to reflect on the ethics of new production practices that arose in response to the deepening agricultural depression. In dairy farming – which proved popular due to its immunity from foreign competition – producers established so-called ‘intensive’ units in suburban areas, where cows were kept indoors, fed on imported cattle cake and replaced with new purchases. Elsewhere, low cereal prices encouraged the production of pigs within indoor ‘factory-style’ units. Veterinarians often moralised about these practices and their implications for livestock health (Woods 2007, 2012). Typical comments included those of practising veterinarian, Lesley Pugh, and pig specialist, D. J. Anthony. Pugh complained that ‘Too often the cow becomes a mere machine for the provision of milk. As a result of our ignorance of the machinery we fail sooner or later to maintain its efficiency. The machine fails and sterility ensues’ (Pugh 1924). Anthony criticised the growing tendency ‘to regard the pig as more of a machine than a live animal’. Warning of a vengeful nature who ‘exacts a penalty for any violation of her laws’, he argued that producers ‘must try to adopt scientific methods while still having due regard for Mother

3 The number of horses in Great Britain fell from 3.07 million in 1911 to 1.89 million in 1924 (Thompson 1976).
Nature’ (Anthony 1940). The proposed solution to all of these problems was for veterinarians to play a more extensive role in the prevention and management of livestock disease.

Similar thinking can be identified in the profession’s concurrent conflict with the People’s Dispensary of Sick Animals (PDSA). Founded in 1917, this charitable organisation offered free treatment to the sick animals of the poor. Treatment was performed by ‘skilled experts’, who were laymen trained through lectures and experience in the PDSA’s hospital. As the charity grew wealthier and its network of clinics and hospitals extended, it attracted criticism from veterinarians keen to increase their own activities in pet medicine. Decrying the sentimentality of the PDSA’s promoters and advertising the profession’s own tradition of providing cheap treatment to poor clients, veterinarians argued that they were best able to judge whether an animal was suffering and whether its owner merited charity. They also argued that on moral grounds, all animals deserved the best possible care, which meant placing them under expert veterinarians, not untrained quacks. Such claims, which overlooked the in-depth training received by PDSA officers, won little public support during the inter-war years (Gardiner 2010).

1.4 The Eclipse of Animal Ethics, 1948–1975

The first half of this paper has shown that prior to World War II, veterinary reflections on ethical issues ranging from professional conduct to the treatment of animals centred on the need to place animals under veterinary care and to ensure full discretion in treatment. These actions would not only serve the interests of the animal but also those of the owner, state and society. This thinking was shaped by the profession’s overlapping ambitions to relieve animal suffering, overcome market competition and extend the scope, autonomy and status of veterinary work.

In the immediate post-war decades, these ambitions were largely achieved. New confidence in science (which had played a crucial role in winning the war), respect for professional expertise and the vital veterinary contribution to feeding the nation in wartime facilitated the passage of the 1948 Veterinary Surgeons Act, which made it illegal for unqualified persons to practice veterinary surgery. This resolved the long battle with the PDSA in the profession’s favour (Gardiner 2010). In 1954, veterinary dissatisfaction with anaesthetics legislation was overcome by the passage of a new act of Parliament. Promoted by the British Veterinary Association (BVA), this granted veterinarians full discretion over anaesthetic agents and techniques (Editorial 1954).

Veterinary services to farmers were also increasing on account of the post-war emphasis placed on domestic food production. In helping farmers to tackle disease, veterinarians enabled them to develop more efficient, intensive systems of production,
as demanded by Government policy. Public criticism of these systems erupted in 1964 with the publication of *Animal Machines*, Ruth Harrison’s expose of factory farming (Harrison 1964). Veterinary reactions to changing agricultural practices reveal a shift in their ethical thinking since the inter-war years. Leaving behind their earlier concerns about going against nature, many argued that if veterinarians were to maintain their ‘rightful place’ on the farm, they had to embrace and assist intensification (Hignett 1956; Sainsbury 1965). Dismissing lay criticisms of factory farming as ‘sentimental anthropomorphism’, they asserted the profession’s moral responsibility for and expertise in humane practices (BVA 1965). In defining health as a state of ‘maximum economic production commensurate with economy and humanity’ (Editorial 1969) and equating disease with poor welfare (BVA 1965), veterinarians proclaimed their ability to make livestock farming both productive and ethical.

Veterinarians continued to equate the ethical care of animals with veterinary care. This view shaped their claims that veterinarians were the experts best qualified to oversee and regulate the use of animals in experiments (The Littlewood Committee 1964–1965). It also caused them to affix the label ‘ethical’ to pharmaceutical companies that restricted drug sales to veterinarians. ‘Unethical’ companies sold direct to farmers. These labels disappeared when the 1968 Medicines Act granted veterinarians privileges in the sale and supply of drugs (MacKellar 1963).

As the scope, autonomy and status of veterinary work increased and the spectre of unqualified competition disappeared, veterinarians ceased to proclaim an ethical ‘deficit’ in the treatment of animals. At the same time, their perceived need to justify the privileges awarded to them under the 1948 Veterinary Surgeons Act pushed professional conduct to the forefront of veterinary ethical concerns. In 1951, the RCVS published its first *Guide to Veterinary Professional Conduct* (RCVS 1951). This contained headings such as: ‘the status and dignity of the veterinary profession’ (which laid down strictures on advertising), ‘relationships between practitioners’ (which emphasised honour, faith and mutual trust) and ‘relationships between veterinarians and laypersons’ (laymen must not carry out veterinary work).

The term ‘ethics’ did not appear until the 1961 edition of the guide, which defined unethical behaviour as that ‘undesirable and unbecoming to a professional man’ (RCVS 1961). Subsequent updates, which appeared every 3 years, reveal the emergence of new ethical concerns thrown up by the changing nature of veterinary employment, practice organisation and therapeutic interventions. By the early 1970s, the code had grown to encompass standards for veterinary hospitals, claims to specialisation, relationships between veterinarians in practice and in industry, and guidance on employing veterinary nurses. This period also saw administrative changes, introduced under the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act, to the RCVS’s procedure for disciplining members who infringed the code (RCVS 1961, 1964, 1967, 1971).
1.5 The Reshaping of Veterinary Ethical Thought, 1975–2000

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the professional, political and public consensus that managing animals ethically meant placing them under veterinary care began to fracture, and new questions arose about the conduct of that care. Formerly, clinical intervention had been viewed as a private veterinary matter: the veterinarian’s professional expertise and code of conduct meant that he or she could be trusted to act in the interests of all parties. Now, however, there was growing recognition within and outwith the profession of the potential conflicts of interest between veterinarians, animals, owners, society and state. This led to new public, political and professional scrutiny of veterinary conduct both within and beyond the clinical setting.

Commentators past and present often link these developments to the operation of financial constraints in the care of large animals, and conversely, to the lack of such constraints in small animal practice, a rapidly expanding field in which major technical advances offered many new prospects for treatment. In both cases, ethical reflection was required to decide what forms of veterinary intervention were necessary and justifiable (Orpin 1984; News 2010). This argument has strength. However, it overlooks the fact that economics have always constrained farmers’ actions to a greater or lesser extent and that many new clinical techniques were developed prior to the 1970s without inspiring this kind of ethical scrutiny. In order to make sense of the late twentieth century reshaping of veterinary ethical thought, it is necessary to move beyond the clinical encounter, to explore its broader social and political contexts.

From the 1970s, trust in all the professions diminished and their privileges, practices and expertise were subjected to challenge. The origins of this challenge lay in the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, the women’s and civil rights movements, and the rise of consumerism and the free market (Cooter 2002). While the medical profession was singled out for particular criticism (Szasz 1961; Foucault 1965; Freidson 1970; Illich 1975), veterinarians did not escape the fallout. The first direct threat came from the Monopoly Commission’s 1976 report on the veterinary profession. One of a set of government-commissioned enquiries into the professions, it claimed that the RCVS’s ‘ethical’ restrictions on advertising contravened the public interest by withholding vital information from customers and preventing competition between practices (News and reports 1976). For RCVS registrar, Alistair Porter, the report signalled that the state no longer trusted the profession to manage its own affairs and to act in the interests of its clients (Porter 1976).

Most veterinarians did not want to permit advertising. They viewed it as a commercial practice at odds with their professional image (Comment 1984). However, in 1984 the RCVS was forced to lift its restrictions. By then, consumer bodies had begun to attack veterinary fees, and the media to scrutinise the profession’s privileges. Animal owners were demanding higher levels of veterinary competence, ethical conduct and value for money (Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons...
1984; Comment 1986; Cripps 1986; Napley 1987) and were ‘fast moving away from the attitude that the word of the professional man ... has to be accepted without question’ (Comment 1985). This shift was reflected in their increasing employment of laymen to perform traditionally ‘veterinary’ tasks like foot trimming and equine dentistry (Comment 1995).

Veterinarians faced other challenges to their claims to be acting in the public good. On account of their services to livestock farmers, they were implicated in mounting criticisms of intensive agricultural practices. Critics highlighted the detrimental effects of indiscriminate antibiotic and pesticide use on the health of humans and the environment, and the impact of factory farming systems on livestock health and welfare (The Swann Committee 1969–1970). Welfare, in particular, achieved a high political profile following a 1978–1979 campaign by animal welfare societies ‘to put animals into politics’ (Hollands 1985).

Critics both within and outwith the profession claimed that veterinarians were failing to take the lead in improving animal welfare. This failure was attributed firstly to veterinarians’ resistance to anthropomorphism, which set them apart from a public that related to animals on largely subjective terms. Secondly, veterinarians were reluctant to engage in general ethical reflection on welfare, instead insisting on objective scientific evidence before acknowledging the existence of a problem. Thirdly, veterinarians’ continuing tendency to equate welfare to health and productivity ran counter to the growing emphasis placed by animal welfare scientists on the animal’s subjective state. Their insights challenged veterinary claims to welfare expertise and encouraged critics in their belief that veterinarians were privileging the interests of livestock owners over the welfare of their animals (Anon 1977; Gee & Meischke 1982; Various 1983; Fox 1984; Broom 1987; Hollands 1987; Carter et al. 1990; Comment 1992).

Implicit in these developments was the realisation that the interests of veterinarians, animals, owners, state and society did not necessarily align. In order to maintain public trust, their legal privileges, social status and market share, veterinarians had to rethink their responsibilities and relationships (Comment 1986; Wooley 1994) and their assumption that veterinary care was, by definition, ethical. While they continued to claim ethical superiority when defending veterinary practices against lay encroachment, in other contexts veterinarians began to reflect more critically on the nature of the care they provided and whose interests it served.


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4 This period saw the rise of the philosophy of animal rights, which awarded animals’ intrinsic worth and viewed welfare initiatives as attempts to justify the unjustifiable keeping of animals for human ends (Regan 1989).

5 A more detailed exploration of this issue – which is beyond the scope of this paper – requires further research into the role of ethics within veterinary education, the debates it stimulated in veterinary meetings and the veterinary press, the rationales for disciplinary investigations performed by the RCVS and the profession’s attempts to assert itself within the field of animal welfare, most notably through the 1984 establishment of the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation.
successive editions, it has shifted from a profession-centred, to an owner-centred, to an animal-centred view of veterinary obligations. In 1975, the rationale for the code was ‘preventing members from harming each other’. The 1978 version claimed that rules were formulated not to confer financial or other benefits on the profession but ‘with the interests of animals and their owners clearly in mind’. In 1984, this statement was included in a new section entitled ‘Duty to the public’. In 1993, it was replaced by a section entitled ‘Duty to animals and their owners’. Later in this edition, the RCVS stated that in formulating ethical guidance, its overriding consideration was to ensure animal welfare. By 2000, veterinarians reading the guide were informed that they must make animal welfare their first consideration. In the list of professional responsibilities, ‘responsibilities to patients’ came first, followed by responsibilities to clients, to the general public and then to professional colleagues.

Concurrently, the RCVS began to pronounce on the ethical status of particular clinical interventions. In 1987, its disciplinary committee made the landmark decision to strike a veterinarian off the register for performing treatment that caused a pony unnecessary suffering and distress. Formerly, the College’s disciplinary apparatus had confined its attention to allegations of unprofessional conduct such as fraud. Clinical interventions had been viewed as a private matter, to be decided by the individual veterinarian in accordance with the circumstances and needs of the animal and its owner. Owners who alleged clinical incompetence or negligence had been left to pursue the matter through the courts, which alone could award compensation. However, the precedent set by the 1987 case showed that the RCVS was now willing to consider such cases. In this way, it broadened its definition of ‘conduct disgraceful in a professional respect’ to include veterinary clinical conduct (Editorial 1987; RCVS 1987).

The 1993 Guide to Professional Conduct reveals the RCVS’s expanding surveillance over clinical practice. It defined the docking of dogs’ tails (which had been debated within the profession since 1969 (Singleton 1970)) as unethical and frowned upon the firing of horses (controversial since 1979 (McCullagh 1979)) to such an extent as to warn that its performance could be used as evidence in disciplinary procedures. The RCVS also noted its intention, ‘from time to time [to] give guidance to the profession in relation to specific procedures which current scientific evidence shows to be ineffective and/or inhumane’ (RCVS 1993). More positive welfare measures were included in its 2000 guide, which stated the veterinarian’s responsibilities to ensure humane treatment, adequate pain control, relief of suffering and the avoidance of neglect.

Meanwhile, the RCVS decided that veterinary ethics was a sufficiently complex and important topic to merit dedicated training. It added a certificate and then a diploma in veterinary ethics, welfare and law to its existing suite of postgraduate qualifications. Problem-based education in veterinary ethics entered the mainstream.

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6 This move did not go unchallenged. Various members of the profession argued that the topics were sufficiently covered by existing clinically oriented programmes (Correspondence 1994).
veterinary curriculum, while the profession’s continuing education journal, *In Practice*, began to publish articles on ethical dilemmas encountered in clinical settings (Mullan & Main 2001). These developments set the seal on the reshaping of veterinary ethical thought. Instead of assuming that the veterinary care of animals was, by definition, ethical, veterinarians now recognised the multiple ethical dilemmas it posed.

### 1.6 Conclusion

This paper has traced the history of veterinary ethics in Britain over the period 1870–2000. It approached this problem by laying aside present-day normative conceptions of veterinary ethics, in order to understand how veterinarians in the past perceived this issue. This mode of analysis reveals the changing nature, scope and importance of professional and animal ethics. It also shows that veterinary ethical thinking is essentially a product of its time, shaped by veterinary prospects, ambitions and practices; methods of animal management; scientific advances; and the relationships between veterinarians, animals, society and the state.

Prior to 1948, when anyone could legally practice veterinary surgery, qualified veterinarians sought to distinguish themselves from the competition by their ethical credentials. Motivated by a mix of humanitarianism, business interests and the desire to increase the profession’s influence, they claimed that veterinary codes of conduct and expertise in relieving suffering meant that the veterinary treatment of animals equated to their ethical treatment. The interests of animal, owner, profession and society were best served by awarding full clinical discretion to the vet concerned.

The passage of the 1948 Veterinary Surgeons Act signalled the state’s recognition of this claim and removed the veterinary need to assert it. Veterinarians then focussed on their professional conduct in an attempt to justify the award of a market monopoly. However, in the later twentieth century, the social and economic climate grew more hostile to the exercise of professional power. In this context, veterinarians began to recognise the potential conflicts in interest between animal, owner, society and profession and to navigate them using new forms of ethical thinking. The key issue was no longer the provision of veterinary care but the manner in which it was performed. In this way, the care provided within the clinical encounter, and its implications for animal welfare, became the focus of veterinary ethical concern.

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Questions and Answers

Q: We always tend to be rather UK-centric in the way in which we view this. This is an international conference and I just wondered if, indeed, being so UK-centric is a marker that we’ve led this debate, or have we trailed it? And, indeed, with the benefit of so many international members here, perhaps a little input of their particular situations would be quite helpful.

A: Yes, I completely agree. Unfortunately, this was, by necessity, a UK-centric account, first of all because no one had written on this issue before, which meant I had no jumping off point, and secondly because writing a paper just on Britain involved months of work. I had to look through the index of every Veterinary Record, searching under multiple headings because there was nothing listed under ethics. So, I would really welcome perspectives from history in other countries.
Q: You ended up with a question: moral progress or product of historical circumstances? Well, couldn’t it be both? Couldn’t it be the case that we actually do have things that we would describe as moral progress, even though we shouldn’t be so proud about it, because we had the opportunity? Now, you said you wouldn’t, as a historian, take a moral stance, but you ended up being relativistic and nihilistic. Couldn’t you allow more progress?

A: Obviously, we wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t feel that there was scope to make progress in ethical thinking. I want to guard against people dismissing the past as irrelevant and viewing our forebears as stupid and immoral. I want to show that history is important and did inform how we got to where we are today.

Q: When I became a veterinarian, I said that my prime concern was the welfare of animals entrusted to my care. Has that always been what people have sworn or when did that come in? There’s obviously an ethical background to it.

A: I can’t give a firm answer. The term ‘welfare’ was used very little prior to Animal Machines, the Brambell Report and the 1968 Agriculture Act. That might give some indication of when the oath was introduced, but I would need to research that further.

Q: It would be very interesting to know when the RCVS oath originated and what differences there are between different countries. One person who has written on this from an international perspective is Caroline Hewson, Professor of Animal Welfare at the Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island, Canada. She wrote a nice article called ‘Veterinarians Who Swear’.

C: Can you clarify for those who don’t know? Is there a kind of Hippocratic Oath for veterinarians?

A: Yes there is, and as far as I’m aware it’s compulsory in the UK, but just for one contrast, the American Veterinary Medical Association oath is voluntary. It’s also taken voluntarily by Canadian veterinarians but is worded differently which suggests some interesting differences in perspective.

C: Just to comment on that particular point. It is not an oath; it is a declaration in this country. There’s a legal difference between the two.

Q: I wonder if it might be possible to see how many people here are veterinarians. You were saying that the veterinary profession considered itself or aimed to become the authority on animal welfare, but from looking around this conference, I think that today this debate doesn’t just involve veterinarians. There are a lot of expert animal welfarists here.

A: The issue of veterinarians coming into animal welfare is quite interesting because in the early years, when welfare was becoming a political issue, veterinarians had little to do with it. I looked through the Veterinary Record in the years that Animal Machines and the Brambell report came out, and there’s very little comment, apart from a few derogatory remarks about Ruth Harrison. I think the BVA’s evidence to
the Brambell committee had to be drafted by the president of the day, because virtually no veterinarians responded to his invitation to contribute. By the mid-1970s, though, veterinarians were suddenly realising that they’d missed the boat. That’s when they founded the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation and decided to sponsor a chair. But certainly early on they were left behind and maybe, as you imply, they’re still being left behind now.

Q: I’ve thought about this idea of moral progress and history and of course the main concern I have is that even if we think it is moral progress, we may, ourselves, be the product of our history. From the point of view of people a 100 years from now, what we think may be complete moral degradation.

Q: It is not my place to defend veterinarians but I just want to make the point that when phrases are used like ‘veterinarians did not consider animal welfare before such and such date’, that is more a question of terminology than practical impact. It is quite clear that there are different views of what is important in animal welfare. Veterinarians have always considered that health and the physical state of the animal is the most important thing. The question then arises of other aspects of animal welfare and what view veterinarians and others have taken of that. We are now in a different position from 50 years ago, because views of what is important in animal welfare have emerged and changed.

A: I disagree with you to some extent because when the term animal welfare began to be used in the 1960s, and certainly by 1970, it meant something quite different from the straightforward prevention of cruelty. However, veterinarians weren’t much interested in the new concept of welfare or in its definition.

Q: I wouldn’t phrase it that they were not interested. They didn’t see the necessity for these additional concepts to health and growth and physical well-being, but there were clearly some aspects of animal welfare which were integral to their profession.

A: Clearly, they cared for animal well-being, but welfare, as we all know, is a slippery concept and it’s very difficult to use it with precision.