A new party for people and animals

HOW many of us have experienced the distressing scenario in which animals are presented to veterinary clinics for the first time in very poor condition? Sometimes these animals are in the end stages of terminal diseases, and euthanasia is necessary to prevent further suffering.

Often these animals might have been saved, had their guardians sought treatment sooner, or even complied with basic husbandry procedures, such as vaccinations, parasite control and neutering. Such scenarios are all too common in veterinary practice, as are restrictions on the provision of necessary medical and surgical interventions, because of lack of funds of animal guardians, our charities or practices.

The frequency with which these scenarios are played out within veterinary practices inevitably lessens our emotional responses to them. To a degree, such desensitisation is necessary to enable us to function professionally within these crises. We must not, however, allow such desensitisation to erode our veterinary ethics.

The *RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct* justifiably places our responsibility to safeguard the welfare of our patients above all other considerations, and society similarly expects veterinarians to show leadership on animal welfare issues.

Accordingly, it should be quite clear that veterinarians do not consider such animal neglect acceptable, and it is up to us to demonstrate this.

Much can be done

There is much that can be done by political parties to improve the welfare and status of animals; yet animals are not adequately protected by any mainstream party.

Instead, they focus on other social issues, with animal issues not often considered seriously. However, many people share their lives with companion animals and most consider themselves to be caring and opposed to animal cruelty and neglect.

Broad concern for animals is, in fact, a mainstream priority, which is poorly

ANDREW KNIGHT outlines the rise of a new force in politics

reflected within the policies of most political parties.

Raising the stakes

Animals Count is a political party established to raise the status of animal issues within UK politics. The party was launched in December 2006 by London animal welfare scientist and educator, Jasmijn de Boo. During the 2004 European Parliament elections, Jasmijn was a candidate for the Dutch Party for the Animals – now the fastest growing political party in Europe.

Although political parties for the animals also exist in Canada, Germany, France and Spain, with rapidly-growing support reflected at the polls, only the Dutch Party had achieved electoral success by 2007, gaining two MPs, one senator, and nine representatives at provincial level.

Within the UK, Animals Count aims to set the standard as the political party advocating most strongly for animals, whilst also supporting other socially and environmentally responsible policies.

Through several mechanisms, we aim to elevate the status of animal issues within politics. First, we seek to demonstrate by example that comprehensive, well-reasoned policies on animal issues are not only possible, but desirable, and can enhance the manifestos of political parties.

We have had some success at encouraging the adoption of our policies by other parties with a far greater command of political power. Indeed, the potential to positively influence much larger parties offers the greatest potential benefits. Accordingly, we have met various MPs and MEPs to advocate animal-friendly policies.

Additionally, we seek to demonstrate that voters care about animal issues, by directly contesting elections. On 1st May, Jasmijn de Boo contested the London Assembly elections, the first time a party for the animals contested any UK election.

Within her constituency, Jasmijn received 1,828 votes, placing her ahead of the much more established Socialist Party.

Given that she competed with minimal funds, after being present for only a short time, the outcome compared favourably with those of independents in other London constituencies who typically received 100 to 700 votes. Support for Animals Count is only likely to grow.

Companion animals

Animals Count has 23 manifesto issues that seek to increase the protection afforded to companion animals, farm animals, wild animals, animals used in biomedical research, and entertainment, which are described in detail at www.AnimalsCount.org.

Companion animal issues are a key concern. Inspired partly by successful Dutch initiatives, which have resulted in the virtual elimination of pet over-population, we propose a pet licensing system within the UK.

Fundamental would be the mandatory completion of a Responsible Animal Care certificate by pet owners, appropriate to each species, covering basic preventive healthcare, nutrition, behaviour, socialisation, training and pet insurance.

Non-compliance would risk fines, that would be used to fund the system. Also essential would be pet identification and registration, annual veterinary check-ups, and mandatory neutering by sexual maturity or earlier, other than in special circumstances.

Although veterinarians are obliged to provide emergency care to any animal presented, and although charities are able to assist some animals when guardians

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are unable to pay for additional necessary care, far too many animals continue to fall through the gaps of the present system, and are consequently euthanased, or fail to receive essential care, because of the inability of clients – particularly those on low incomes – to pay.

However, animals provide important services to society, and directly or indirectly contribute to the lives of most of us.

In return, we believe these animals deserve at least a basic level of social support, and that we have an ethical obligation to provide it. Hence, we propose the establishment of a basic animal healthcare system, comparable to the NHS.

Increased funding

The system would seek to fund the expansion of services provided through existing private veterinary clinics and charities for those on low incomes. It would substantially increase governmental funding of charities. Such funding is at least as justifiable as public sector funding of arts or sports.

Other proposals include the employment of an Animal Protection Officer by each local council, and increased penalties for convicted animal abusers, with mandatory completion of a Responsible Animal Care course.

We would restrict and regulate animal breeding, particularly of animals with hereditary characteristics contrary to good welfare. We would regulate pet stores, restrict the keeping of exotic animals as pets, and crack down on dog fighting.

We welcome the involvement of additional veterinarians within Animals Count. If there are issues you would like us to consider incorporating within our political manifesto and campaigns, do let us know.

Andrew Knight, BSc, BVMS, CertAW, MRCVS, is president of Animals Count. For details see www.AnimalsCount.org.

Key aims of Animals Count include:

- To elevate the status of animal issues within UK politics.
- To increase educational programmes concerning responsible animal care.
- To establish a basic national health care system for animals.
- To strengthen legislation and regulations against animal neglect and abuse.
- To restrict breeding of animals with hereditary characteristics contrary to good welfare.

Workshop for new managers

A ONE-day workshop is being held by the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons to provide a grounding in some of the common issues faced by people when taking on managerial responsibilities.

The one-day course will take place on 9th October in Staffordshire. The cost is £160 plus VAT for the first delegate and £140 plus VAT for further delegates from the same practice.

For more information, and to book places, contact the SPVS office on 01926 410 454 or e-mail office@spvs.org.uk.