

Knight A. Veterinary views about welfare are improving. *Vet Times* [UK] 2012; 42(34): 27. [letter].

Dear Editor,

Fiona Macmillan's criticism of the positions of veterinarians on animal welfare issues (August 13 issue) has had some merit, both historically and more recently. A 2005 survey of the positions of national and international veterinary associations on animal welfare issues demonstrated these sometimes lag *behind* those of the general public, despite the entirely legitimate societal expectation that veterinarians demonstrate leadership on animal welfare issues (1). And although a small proportion of veterinarians have always been actively involved in campaigning for restrictions on the breeding of dogs and cats with anatomical deformities contrary to good welfare, the 2008 BBC documentary *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* demonstrated the critical mass of public support, and indeed, outrage, that is apparently necessary, before the profession is prepared to condemn such practices with the vociferousness they deserve, and thereby risk alienating a small minority of paying clients. Such failure of leadership not only betrays the animals whose interests society justifiably expects us to represent, but also demonstrates a deeply disturbing degree of selfishness and cowardice.

Fortunately, however, things are changing for the better. Recognising that animal welfare has become a major social issue in recent years, the veterinary profession is finally starting to take significant steps to engage with it. Several veterinary conferences on animal welfare science, ethics and law have been held in the UK and internationally in recent years. Those run by the UK Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law Veterinary Association (AWSELVA) are of a high standard and increasingly heavily attended. In an extremely ground-breaking development, veterinary specialty colleges in animal welfare science, ethics and law are currently being established in both Europe and the US. Such veterinary specialisations previously existed only in the UK and Australia. Several veterinary schools including within the UK and abroad have recently established centres or professors for animal welfare education. And several veterinary organisations dedicated to animal welfare and ethics have very recently been established or are rapidly growing. Examples include AWSELVA in the UK, both Sentient – the Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics, and Vets Against Live Export, in Australia, and the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association, in the US. Most of these are actively involved in campaigning against established animal use practices resulting in welfare problems. And with respect to Fiona Macmillan's main concerns about animal experimentation, representatives of UK veterinary associations have sometimes spoken out in the press against rising laboratory animal numbers, and some of us have published far more detailed critiques (2).

Ms Macmillan rightly asserts that the public believes veterinarians have a duty to advocate on behalf of all animals, rather than just their own patients, and that the profession has often failed to do so. However, veterinary interest and involvement in animal welfare and ethics is rapidly growing, and the future is looking much brighter both for the animal welfare reputation of veterinarians, and for the animals society expects us to protect.

Andrew Knight DipECAWBM (WSEL), PhD, MRCVS, FOCAE
- European Veterinary Specialist in Welfare Science, Ethics and Law
- Fellow, Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics

London, UK

1. De Boo J and Knight A. Educating the veterinary professional about animal welfare. *Altern Anim Experimentation* 2006; 23(Spl. issue: *Proc. 5th World Congress 2005*): 71-4.
http://www.andrewknight.info/publications/anim_welf_stds_vets/anim_welf_stds_vets.html
2. Knight A. *The Costs and Benefits of Animal Experiments*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2011.