



January 01, 2011

Veterinarian's Oath revised to emphasize animal welfare commitment

Posted December 19, 2010

At its Nov. 18-20 meeting, the AVMA Executive Board approved a recommendation from the Animal Welfare Committee to amend the [Veterinarian's Oath](#) to clearly identify animal welfare as a priority of the veterinary profession.

The newly revised section of the oath—the committee's additions appear in italics—reads as follows: "Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health *and welfare*, the *prevention and* relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge."



"From today forward, every graduate entering our profession will swear an oath not only to protect animal health but also welfare; to not only relieve animal suffering but to prevent it. That's a powerful statement defining

ourselves and our responsibilities, not a vague symbol," Dr. J. Bruce Nixon, AWC chair-elect, said about the Executive Board action.

The earliest version of the Veterinarian's Oath was adopted by the AVMA House of Delegates in 1954 and revised in 1969 and again in 1999.

Amending the Veterinarian's Oath was no small proposal, explained Executive Board Chair John R. Brooks. But, after extensive debate and deliberation, the board was right to approve the changes, he said, because the updated oath reinforces veterinarians' responsibilities to promote animal welfare and is consistent with contemporary veterinary medicine.

In addition, the board action sends a message. "The message is we as the AVMA and veterinarians in general do recognize that protecting animal well-being is what we're all about," Dr. Brooks said.

In its recommendation to the board, the committee explained that the changes refocus and update the Veterinarian's Oath to make it clear that veterinarians have responsibilities not only for animals' health, but also for their welfare.

"In addition, these changes extend the veterinarian's approach toward animal welfare from one of treatment only ... to one of prevention and treatment ... which is consistent with modern approaches to veterinary practice," the committee added.

It was noted in the recommendation background that no mention was previously made in the oath of veterinarians' responsibility to ensure adequate animal welfare, nor was there any reference to promoting good animal welfare.

Moreover, as written, the oath was a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to protecting animal welfare, according to the committee. "AWC members believe strongly that such an approach is not consistent with an organization (and by extension, a profession) that has embraced a strategic goal to be 'a leading advocate for, and an authoritative science-based resource on, animal welfare'," the recommendation stated.

The approval came despite a proposal from the AVMA Council on Veterinary Service for the Executive Board to reaffirm the Veterinarian's Oath without revision. In September 2009 the council reviewed the oath in accordance with the five-year policy review directive and recommended the board reaffirm the oath with no changes. The board referred the proposal back to the COVS, however, to consider whether animal welfare should be specifically addressed in the oath.

The AVMA Animal Welfare Strategic Goal team saw the board action as a step toward implementation of the Association's strategic goal for animal welfare by explicitly stating in the oath that veterinarians have a responsibility to promote animal well-being and prevent animal suffering. The Animal Welfare Committee would later formally propose amending the oath accordingly.



AVMA President-Elect René A. Carlson supported revising the Veterinarian's Oath, saying it advances the AVMA's efforts to be a global leader in animal welfare.

During its review, the COVS queried several AVMA councils and committees as to whether a few words about veterinary "stewardship" of the animals should be added to the oath. The council was reluctant to use the term "animal welfare" because the council believes there is no universally accepted definition of the term. The AVMA entities that responded to the COVS saw no need to revise the oath and suggested reaffirming the original wording, which the council recommended at the November meeting.

In its recommendation to the board, the AWC noted the concerns over the definition and explained that animal welfare has been defined in the scientific literature as "the state of an individual in relation to its environment." An animal's welfare can be measured and may be either good or poor, the AWC wrote, adding that the AVMA has concurred with policies developed by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) in which the term is used in a similar way.

During deliberations, some board members raised concerns about differing definitions of animal welfare. But a clear majority thought it was more important that the board make a strong statement about the profession's commitment to animal welfare than get mired in debate. "We have to do this if the AVMA is going to be a global leader in animal welfare," said

AVMA President-Elect René A. Carlson. "We can't keep debating this. The time has come."

Part of the AWC's review of the oath included a review of the promises made by veterinarians in other countries. Most English-speaking countries whose oaths the committee was able to obtain include mention of animal welfare, according to Dr. Nixon, who added it was not the committee's intention to copy other countries with regard to their veterinarians' expression of commitment.

"I believe our Association did the right thing at the right time for the right reasons," Dr. Nixon said. "We can be proud of its leadership for having the wisdom to adjust our oath to reflect professional progression."

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