

Origins and Early Development of the Veterinary Profession

The provision of specialist care for animals is probably almost as ancient as their domestication. It was a feature of ancient civilisation, with the Egyptians being particularly noted for their attachment to the animal kingdom. In Western Europe, however, the specialist care of livestock fell to stockmen, such as shepherds, and crafts, such as farriery. The latter has a distinguished history, officially recognised in England as early as 1346.

Until relatively recently, those carers, who also sought to cure animals or ward off their ailments, did so on the basis of a mixture of empirical practice, based on observation and trial-and-error learning, and magic. This last was what distinguished such carers from the veterinary surgeon when the latter appeared.

The origins of the veterinary profession lie in what became known as the Enlightenment, in the eighteenth century. This was an era when reason and science came to replace religion and magic as the basis for an understanding of the natural world. There was a new regard for animals, in a manner that anticipated the rise of Darwinism, and a scientific approach to their diseases that was a part of the rise of comparative medicine.

The Enlightenment was the age of the 'Sovereignty of Knowledge', and the contemporary stress on education enables a precise identification of the origins of the new profession. The first officially recognised veterinarians were the graduates of the great veterinary schools founded in Western Europe between 1762 and 1821. The oldest is that at Alfort in France, the result of an initiative from Charles Bourgelat. Other European States, including Britain, copied the French initiative. The first head of the Royal Veterinary College in London, founded in 1791, was Benoit Vial, a student and teacher at Alfort. Others also sought French scientists or sent their own to the French schools to learn.

Early veterinary education was limited in scope. Its focus was on the horse and its nature owed much to farriery. This was, in part, because their earliest employment was overwhelmingly in armies, servicing the thousands of horses necessary for cavalry and artillery operations. It was only after the end of the French Wars in 1815 that the veterinary profession began to realise a greater potential. Although veterinary training remained rudimentary for the most part, many of the European veterinary schools and colleges (with the exception of those in Britain) became important centres for scientific research.

Three developments in particular illustrate the manner in which science contributed to and veterinarians gained from the advance of science.

Two of these were direct responses to the search for answers to the epizootics that threatened European cattle in the nineteenth century. Although the employment of slaughter policies predated the emergence of the profession, and of germ theory, Pasteur's work demonstrating the validity of the latter was an important factor in leading to the development of

public veterinary services. These directed the campaigns that led to the eradication of rinderpest and contagious bovine pleuropneumonia in the late nineteenth century.

The work of Pasteur and Koch in immunology also underpinned a growth in veterinarian capabilities in meeting animal diseases. But it was veterinary scientists, such as Chaveau and Boulay, who played a key role in laying the foundations for Pasteur's achievements, and who gave him enthusiastic support. In similar fashion, veterinary scientists, researching the dangers from diseased or contaminated animal produce, played a leading role in the development of parasitology. In turn, this led to veterinary surgeons in western Europe (but not Britain) finding increased employment as meat inspectors.

Throughout its history then, the veterinary profession has advanced in tandem with the advance of science. By the end of the nineteenth century, its value in the protection of animal and human health was well established, as was its status relative to other professions. This was recognised in the increasing incorporation of veterinary schools within universities, the peak institutions of tertiary education. The relationship between science, education and the profession remains at the core of its *raison d'etre* today.

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