VETERINARY PROFESSION AND PRACTICES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Dr Robert Sykes
Session 1: Current situation and specificity of veterinary products distribution and use in Africa
Veterinary profession and practices in South Africa

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SOUTH AFRICA

Abstract

The veterinary profession in South Africa is analysed and statistics of the various branches within the profession are given. An analysis of the different types of practices is made and the activities outlined. The situation in State veterinary services is discussed and the importance of the state in the control of notifiable diseases is emphasized. The initiative of private veterinary practitioners and practices in taking veterinary services to the developing communities by means of Community Veterinary Clinics is described.
I. Introduction

The veterinary profession in South Africa has 2739 registered veterinarians of which about 250 are currently working in other countries. There are 865 registered practices of which 70% are small animal practices, 25 % are mixed practices and 5 % are equine and specialist practices. The profession is governed by the South African Veterinary Council which is the legislative and judicial body and is responsible for the registration of veterinarians, veterinary nurses and technologists and specialists. The Council falls under the Minister of Agriculture and lies in the Department of Agriculture. The Veterinary Council controls the standards of primary veterinary education and ensures that practicing veterinarians maintain their standards by completing a minimum number of continuing education courses and scientific presentations1.

The Veterinary Council is also responsible for setting and maintaining the ethical standards of practice and compliance with legislation that either directly or indirectly affect the individual veterinarian such as the Veterinary Act and Medicines Control Act.

The profession has established an association of veterinarians called the South African Veterinary Association which is responsible for representing the profession and its interests. The Association consists of a federal council and branches in each of the provinces of South Africa. Each branch has a representative on the Federal Council.

The Association also has a number of speciality groups. These are: Animal behaviour group, Avian practitioners, Complementary medicine, Equine practitioners, Large animal practitioners, Veterinary clinicians group, Pig veterinary Society, Poultry veterinarians, Veterinary Public Health, VLDG and the Wildlife Group. These groups play a major role in looking after the interests of the members, organising congresses and lectures and giving input to the Federal Council. The Federal Council of the SAVA has a close liaison with the Veterinary Council and is able to comment on decisions made by the Veterinary Council.

This structure ensures that the veterinary profession in South Africa is well represented and makes meaningful contribution to the welfare and standards of the profession.

II. Discussion

1/ State Veterinary Service

Veterinary Services are, in general, centralised with the overall control of animal health being the responsibility of the National Directorate of Veterinary Services. The National Directorate of Veterinary Services has five sub-directorates. These are

1 South African Veterinary Council Newsletter / South African Veterinary Newsletter
• Disease Control
• Animal Health, Import and Export Policy
• Epidemiology
• Veterinary Hygiene
• Quarantine and Inspection services
• Veterinary Public Health

Table 1 Personnel - Veterinary Services Statistics. Dec. 2007

<table>
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<th>Administrative Staff</th>
<th>Technical Staff</th>
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Each of the nine provinces in South Africa has an autonomous veterinary department that controls the activities and services within the provinces. The Directors of each province report to the Central Directorate of Veterinary Services. Each province has autonomy but the overall control still lies with the central Department.

2/ Municipal Veterinary Services

Veterinarians working in Public Health are employed by the larger municipalities. These veterinarians are responsible for meat and milk hygiene. They are usually situated at the abattoirs in the larger centres and are responsible for enforcing the basic meat and milk hygiene standards. They will ensure that slaughter and hygiene in meat processing plants is of an international standard. In this situation, they are responsible for inspecting and recommending approval of meat and offal rendering plants. They are also responsible for the standards milk collection, transport and processing. They are associated with laboratories that perform the microbiological and analytical tests on meat and milk products.
3/ Rural Practitioners

In South Africa a number of veterinarians manage to supply an adequate service to local farmers. For obvious reasons these practices are concentrated in areas where the livestock numbers are adequate to support the practice. In most cases this means a fair sized town that services a farming population consisting mainly of dairy and semi-intensive beef production. An important breakthrough occurred during the eighties when a number of veterinarians commenced practicing herd health. The concept caused the veterinarians involved with herds to take an approach which involved managing the individual farmer's herd health. This meant advising the farmer on breeding cycles, inoculations, worm control, ectoparasite control and general hygiene and management.

The farmer contracted the veterinarian and paid for the service on a retainer basis. This approach resulted in an increased utilisation of the veterinarian's ability and produced a measurable impact on the farmer's profitability. A great advantage was that the farmer knew in advance how much veterinary advice would be and could see the measurable return.

A further result of this contractual relationship between the farmer and the veterinarian was that the farmer turned to the veterinarian for advice on what remedies and vaccines should be used. The farmer was now able to obtain his remedies from the veterinarian and at the same time receive professional advice on the proper use of the products.

4/ Equine Practice

South Africa has a thriving horse-racing and horse-riding community. Breeding and racing thoroughbred horses is a multimillion Rand industry. As a result a number of veterinarians have specialised in equine practice and are involved in the training stables and breeding establishments. It is estimated that there are about 150 veterinarians that perform veterinary procedures on equines. There are about 10 veterinarians who specialise in equine practice to the exclusion of other species of animal.

These veterinarians are mainly situated near race tracks where trainers have their stables. Those veterinarians involved with breeding are generally situated in the breeding areas which are generally in areas with a moderate climate such as the Cape.

Other veterinarians who do an appreciable amount of equine practice are those associated with riding and show jumping horses and also horses intended for use as polo ponies and endurance trials.
5/ Veterinarians in Industry

About 50 veterinarians are in the full time employ of companies associated with the development, marketing and servicing of veterinary remedies. A knowledge of veterinary pharmaceutics and drug handling and use is essential. These veterinarians are required to maintain international contacts with drug developments and provide a valuable service not only to the client (farmer, pet-owner) but also to the veterinary pharmaceutical industry.

6/ Academia

The Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria, based at Onderstepoort just outside Pretoria is well known internationally. It has a teaching and support staff of some 60 – 80 veterinarians. The full degree course takes six years and consists of a basic Bachelor Degree of three years with basic veterinary subjects such as anatomy and physiology. This is followed by the intensive veterinary degree course culminating in the final BVSc degree. The faculty is recognised internationally.

7/ Wild-Life Veterinarians

A small group of veterinarians are associated with wild-life conservation and game farming. These can be full-time or part-time involved with wild life capture and control. A few are in the full time employ of the National Parks and the Natal Parks Boards.

8/ Welfare Veterinarians

A number of welfare organisations work in the poorer communities. These include the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), Animals in Distress (AIDS) and the Animal Anti-cruelty League. The larger societies employ full time veterinarians.

9/ Community Veterinary Clinics

In a number of larger centres and where a need has been identified small animal practitioners have offered their services free of charge to the emerging communities. They complement the services of welfare organisations and concentrate on areas where veterinary services are not available.

10/ Small Animal Practice

All the larger towns and cities have numbers of veterinary practices that specialise in small animals. There are over 350 veterinarians that belong to the clinicians group. These are the so-called dog and cat practices although the animals include exotic pets, reptiles and birds.
practices range from one-man practices with only the basic equipment for routine operations and emergency treatment to very sophisticated multi-veterinarian practices. These latter practices have, in some cases, sophisticated equipment such as x-rays and sonar-scan. There is a practice in Johannesburg that has even got an MRI machine. These practices have sophisticated hospitalisation facilities and also employ a staff of qualified veterinary nurses.

In the last 15 years, small animal practices have been given sole distribution of certain vets-only diets by mainly international pet food companies. These diets for dogs and cats are highly sophisticated and the producers have aimed their marketing and sales through veterinary practices only. These vets-only products do not include prescription diets aimed at treating specific veterinary conditions such as elderly dogs and cats, sick and convalescing animals and dogs with conditions such as renal failure and eczema. The sale of these pet foods is so profitable that some veterinary practices are totally reliant on the sale of these foods for their continued existence.

As a result of this sophistication, a clinical pathological service has also developed offering the practising veterinarian a long list of haematological and other diagnostic tests as an adjunct to the practice.

III. Conclusion

The veterinary profession in South Africa is very diverse and covers widely differing areas of practice. As with any country, the population distribution of veterinarians is skewed towards practices that bring in the greatest economic reward. The relative sophistication of the production farmer is in stark contrast to the unsophisticated developing farmer. Veterinary Services struggles to attract veterinarians and this inevitably results in insufficient servicing of state services.

The veterinary profession and State in South Africa face an enormous challenge to provide all sections of the community with the necessary infrastructure to ensure the continued supply of veterinary services both private and state to ensure the development of the agricultural community and food security.