

Veterinarians with Disabilities: An International Issue

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INTRODUCTION

This seems to me to be a very dangerous development. Do you realise what this profession is all about? It is not a question of playing with cats and dogs, you know, or of feeding lumps of sugar to horses. We have to get down on our hands and knees, to be covered in muck, to go without sleep. I don't know what disabled people are thinking of—I thought that there were certain jobs reserved for them, like looking after car parks or selling lottery tickets. We do a great job in society as it is—what would we be doing getting involved in social work? I would recommend that you try to change your project to another part of the university—what about social sciences or education? (Veterinarian 1)

Veterinarians are at the forefront of social and economic development, you know. Society depends totally upon us for its very survival—for ensuring its food supplies and also, increasingly, for the health of its peoples. This dependency lays a heavy burden on our shoulders but one that we should welcome. It bestows upon us the responsibility to look beyond our immediate duties and responsibilities and to see how we can contribute to the well-being of society in other areas. We cannot show excessive concern about one area of the well-being of our fellow citizens and be indifferent to the rest.

Considering how people with disabilities can contribute to our profession seems to me to be an ideal way of integrating this concern for the other issues affecting humanity into our work. It brings us face to face with the endeavours being made by professionals in other fields. It makes us realise that perfection and excellence have many faces; it also places before us the stark reality that we know very little, really, about what makes a veterinarian. Finally, it helps us to see ourselves as instruments rather than masters of the universe. Our world is in need of many veterinarian instruments. If people with disabilities can become such instruments, the veterinary profession can forge an ever closer bond with the rest of society. (Veterinarian 2)

Readers will no doubt wish to assess for themselves which view most closely resembles their own. While most of us would want to be seen to have the broadest possible view, demonstrating knowledge of the world outside our own work, the reality is that for most people this would be tempered by an acute feeling of anxiety and disquiet. A veterinarian who is disabled? Who cannot walk or hear? Haven't

we always been taught that veterinarians have a serious responsibility toward the public? Are we now going to throw aside all that we have been taught about health and safety and set out on a reckless adventure, just to prove that we are in touch with society?

AN ISSUE FOR EVERY COUNTRY AND CONTINENT

The issue of people with disabilities entering and working in the veterinary profession is necessarily an international one rather than a localized concern restricted to a few of the so-called developed countries. The reasons for this will be explored later in this article; at this stage, it is appropriate to give an outline of the work currently taking place in the United Kingdom—one of the previously mentioned “developed countries.” Despite such a level of development, the idea that disabled people might have a role in veterinary work has come like a bolt out of the blue for many both within and outside the profession. As we age, we tend to think that “there is nothing new under the sun”—until, one day, we discover that there are other undreamt-of metaphorical suns.

“OPENING THE STABLE DOOR”: A UK RESEARCH PROJECT

October 2000 was an important month for the UK veterinary profession, although few people realized it. It was preceded by the hard work of staff at the Royal Veterinary College, University of London, which resulted in government funding for a two-year project. Fortunately for UK veterinary schools, the government has attached a high level of importance to ensuring that people with disabilities can enter higher education. This guarantees that they can thereafter enter those professions that demand this level of education.

Even if academic attainment is a prerequisite for entry to veterinary schools, however, it is far from being the only requirement. As our US counterparts explain,

All applicants to the College of Veterinary Medicine must be able to cope with the physical and mental rigors of the curriculum and the demanding nature of the veterinary profession. Academic standards have been established for all areas of the curriculum and cannot be waived. The skillful and efficient performance of essential functions, required by the veterinary curriculum and profession, are required of all students.¹

In recognition of “the physical and mental rigors of the curriculum and the demanding nature of the veterinary profession,” the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) agreed that research was necessary in order to establish exactly what these “physical and mental rigors” are and how they relate to people with disabilities wishing

to enter veterinary schools. The resulting project, "Opening the Stable Door," based at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), ended in December 2002. The following month saw the beginning of an exciting three-year initiative called "DIVERSE: Disability in Veterinary Education: Resources for Sustainable Enhancement," also funded by HEFCE and directed by Anne Tynan. This new project will be described shortly, following a brief overview of the work from 2000 to 2002.

2001: AT THE PORTAL OF THE PROFESSION

Although "Opening the Stable Door" was based at the RVC, it was carried out in close collaboration with colleagues in the five other UK veterinary schools—Bristol, Cambridge, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. It was clear from the start that even if the issue of veterinary students with disabilities had not been examined before, none of the schools was new to it. Indeed, some staff have gained extensive experience of helping students with disabilities to pursue their studies and to qualify—legally and on a par with their peers—as veterinary surgeons. In most cases, staff have made strenuous efforts to give each student the best possible chance of succeeding without compromising the essential requirements of the curriculum.

If six veterinary schools are better than one, 32 schools are even better—that is, the 28 US and four Canadian veterinary medical colleges. As a result of a short research trip to the US in spring 2001, the report *At the Portal of the Profession* was published in November 2001.² Apart from giving a general overview, the report presents what is described as "A Bird's Eye View" of the experiences of some of the 31 colleges and of some students with disabilities at those colleges. It also makes use of the experiences of a number of disabled veterinarians.

2002: DISSEMINATION AND INFORMATION

During the year after the publication of *At the Portal of the Profession*, which was sent to veterinary schools and organizations worldwide, information continued to flow in. The report was commented on by young people with disabilities who want to enter veterinary school, veterinarians who have a disability, UK disability organizations, and different UK government departments, including the Health and Safety Executive. The list could fill pages—suffice to say that views have been obtained from a cross-section of the UK population.

Europe

From a European perspective, the General Assembly of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in May 2002, brought with it the chance to launch the issue at a European level. Colleagues from France, Spain, Sweden, and Ireland—among other countries—quickly demonstrated the European thirst for more information and guidance on issues relating to veterinarians with disabilities. The first country to commit the issue to paper was Spain, where the Consejo General de Colegios de Veterinarios de España printed a translation of an article about "Opening the Stable Door" in their publication *Informacion Veterinaria*.³ Within days of being published, the article resulted in a series of e-mails from Spanish veterinarians with disabilities. To be on the receiving end of this informa-

tion, so generously shared by such busy professionals, has been an exciting experience. It has helped to counteract the effect of the ongoing skepticism of those who lack the experience to believe in possibilities outside their own worldview. Skeptics do serve a purpose, however, although possibly not the one that they would like. Encountering opposition has only encouraged us through the difficulties of this project, which is now bearing fruits far beyond those that were first imagined.

The World

In September 2002 human disability made its first entrance onto the international veterinary stage in Tunisia, the first African and Arab country to host the World Veterinary Congress. Veterinarians from Africa, Asia, North and South America, Europe, and Australia participated in two presentations given on "Opening the Stable Door" and *At the Portal of the Profession*. Once again, these sessions resulted in some fascinating feedback. Delegates subsequently spoke or wrote about their own disability or that of a colleague or, in some cases, a beloved child. On numerous occasions there was an outpouring of joy: "I can't believe that our profession is getting to grips with this—it's wonderful. Who would have ever thought it possible?" Even people who initially thought that they had had no contact with anyone with a disability began to remember "X who was in the year above me at veterinary school—he had to work extra hard to overcome it but made it in the end" or "a woman working in the animal hospital in X when I did a rotation there—she couldn't stand up for long and used a wheelchair when she had a bad day." It was as if a mist was clearing away and people were beginning to see things (or people) from the past or the present that they had not realized were there.

Once again, and inevitably, the voice of caution was sounded in accents and languages from different parts of the world. One of the most interesting parts of this project has been to see how veterinarians trained in different countries have all absorbed an identical sense of responsibility toward animals, toward the profession, and toward the public. Concerns about animal welfare and human safety are always the first to be mentioned when one speaks of people with disabilities. After some thought, veterinarians who have retained the inquiring spirit of their youth are ready to accept that they may be very ignorant when it comes to disabled people and, therefore, cannot pass absolute judgment as to whether or not people with disabilities can maintain the high standards required.

2003 AND THE FUTURE

The wealth of evidence gathered was enough to convince the educational funding body, HEFCE, that money spent on developing the research carried out during "Opening the Stable Door" would bring enormous benefits across the sector. In October 2002, two years after the first project began, it was announced that £250,000 would be given to the four English veterinary schools, assisted by the two Scottish schools, for a further three years' work. This was the largest grant within the disability funding program for this period to be given to any university, resulting in the highest possible national profile.

DIVERSE—the UK Veterinary Medicine Disability Project—is the next stage of this work. Since it began in January 2003,

this project has been developing the research work carried out to date by focusing on two key areas of veterinary education.⁴ It will cover the broad span of issues relating to people with disabilities and the veterinary profession and will therefore provide an in-depth analysis of what is possible – as well as what is not. The two key aims of the project are as follows.

1. To link the essential competences for veterinary surgeons with a range of disabilities, taking into account people's ways of coping with their disability.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) is currently developing Day 1 and Year 1 competences for newly qualified veterinary surgeons. DIVERSE will link these competences with different disabilities, indicating how disabled people's ways of coping with their disability – their "coping strategies" – can ensure that they obtain the necessary level of competence in spite of their disability. Inevitably, the study will also highlight situations where someone's coping strategies would be inadequate for the task. DIVERSE will simultaneously examine the often vexed question of "reasonable" adjustments or accommodations. These may range, for example, from arranging for a student to work weekend shifts instead of at night to allowing someone with a hearing impairment to use an amplified stethoscope. This part of the project will result in a range of resources and training material for staff, as well as providing information for applicants and students with disabilities. A development program for staff at all the schools will be carried out alongside the above work during the three-year lifespan of DIVERSE.

2. To analyze the accessibility of extramural studies (EMS) placements.

Extramural studies (EMS) are the work placements that veterinary students must carry out in order to be able to qualify as veterinary surgeons. An issue often raised by those concerned about students with disabilities is that working life outside veterinary school can often pose serious difficulties for all veterinary students, not just those with a disability. Students are required to carry out 12 weeks' Animal Husbandry and 26 weeks' Clinical EMS. The DIVERSE study will analyze the different types of EMS placements, resulting in both a training resource for EMS placement providers and the development of a national EMS database, a national register of veterinary practices that take students on work placements.

Collaboration with Colleagues in Medicine and Dentistry

An important and unique element of DIVERSE, and one that helped to attract the funding, is its expected impact upon related sectors such as medicine and dentistry. Although one might expect the medical profession to lead the way in the issue of medical students with disabilities – it is, after all, a profession focusing on health, illness, and disability – colleagues at medical as well as dental schools have indicated that they are also desperate for guidance. Like veterinary schools, these institutions are subject to the new UK disability legislation – the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 – amended in 2001 to ensure that students with disabilities have legal rights. Since September 1, 2002, all institutions of higher education have been required to make appropriate provisions for students with disabilities with-

out discriminating against them. The difficulties of achieving this have united the three disciplines and resulted in a small study, entitled *Pushing the Boat Out*, that bridged the gap between "Opening the Stable Door" and DIVERSE.⁵ While medical and dental school colleagues will be helped by the veterinary experience gained to date, the veterinary field has also reaped rich benefits from the input of their colleagues in medicine and dentistry.

Pushing the Boat Out

This study was funded by the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network subject centre for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine (LTSN-01). The study focuses on the 31 medical and 14 dental schools and their respective professional bodies, comparing their policies and procedures with those of the six veterinary schools and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). *Pushing the Boat Out* was published in March 2003 and distributed to all schools, professional bodies, and other related organizations.⁵

The Sequel to *Pushing the Boat Out*

In April 2003, it was decided that the report *Pushing the Boat Out* had had such an impact upon staff in medical, dental, and veterinary schools that a follow-up report was warranted. The aim was to investigate the effects of the first report and to examine in greater depth a number of issues arising from it. Anne Tynan began work on the second study, entitled *The Sequel*, in September 2003 and in January 2004 submitted it for publication by LTSN-01. In March 2004 the publication will be available online on the LTSN-01 Web site, <<http://www.ltsn-01.ac.uk>>.

The RCVS Working Group on Disability

In 2002, the RCVS set up a Working Group on Disability. As a result of the work of this group, in November 2003 RCVS published a set of guidelines on the admission of students with disabilities to the professional degree course.⁶

These guidelines will be updated in the light of experience, particularly through the work of the DIVERSE project. They will also take into account any potential changes to the RCVS Essential Competences required of new veterinary graduates. At the time of writing (December 2003), the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) was consulting on proposals to update the existing Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966).⁷

Future changes to the Act could potentially open up the veterinary profession to people with a range of mobility difficulties, for example, who might currently find it impossible to carry out the necessary undergraduate education in relation to large animals.

The General Medical Council (GMC) and the General Dental Council (GDC)

The close working relationships established with colleagues in medical and dental schools have resulted in the participation in DIVERSE of the UK regulatory bodies for medicine and dentistry: the General Medical Council and the General Dental Council. Both have appointed observers to serve on the DIVERSE Project Steering Group, which meets twice a year. This guarantees the rapid transmission of knowledge and experience, enabling all three professions – medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine – to develop comple-

mentary policies and procedures relating to disabled students and professionals.

FROM THE UK TO THE WORLD

It was stated earlier that the issue of veterinarians with disabilities may well have raised its first head in the UK—as a result of a combination of changes in disability legislation and the work of inspired veterinary school staff—but is necessarily an international rather than a localized issue.

Why? Why should colleagues in countries without such legislation make any effort to incorporate the findings of “Opening the Stable Door,” *At the Portal of the Profession*, or DIVERSE into their policies and procedures? Is this likely to be a passing obsession with little impact on the essentials of veterinary work and life, and certainly of little interest to anyone abroad?

To understand exactly why a study of this nature would be incomplete without contributions from every country and continent, one needs to step into the United Nations arena for a while and view the issue from another perspective.

The New Sophistication of Human Rights

In many respects, the world has come a long way since the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. The different human rights movements—including disability rights organizations—have helped to demonstrate that a society truly inspired by the conviction that every human being is equal in dignity must adapt its form to that conviction. This is why, for example, UK society has had to change in accordance with its proclaimed belief in the rights of people with disabilities. It is why the implementation of this belief has led to the current initiative examining how people with disabilities can have a role within veterinary work.

In talking to colleagues from some African and Asian countries, however, one is reminded of the emergence of a gap between a series of new and sophisticated rights being promoted in advanced societies—one of which our issue could be considered to be—and the more basic rights often still not being met in developing countries. Having spent two and a half years (2000–2002) working as Student Disability Officer at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, I had a unique opportunity to learn from African and Asian disabled students about the contrasts between rights issues in their countries and those in the UK or the US. While they understood and supported the achievements of the UK disability rights movements, they were often tragically aware of the issues of food security and poverty and hunger alleviation also familiar to veterinarians involved in sustainability issues.

To see how these issues can be combined and to ensure that this article is relevant to colleagues in all countries and continents, it is worth looking at UN policy and activity in the areas of sustainable agriculture and rural development. Could the DIVERSE initiative, which aims for the “sustainable enhancement” of the education of veterinary students with disabilities, also bridge the rights gap and contribute to the more immediate needs of societies in development?

Staff from veterinary schools in advanced countries faced with the immediate difficulties of integrating students with disabilities should also benefit from seeing the issue within

a broader context. Young veterinary students have grown up in what could be described as “a sustainability epoch,” and, therefore, staff dealing with them should learn how to situate the new challenges of disability within this context.

Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development

The United Nations Sustainable Development – Agriculture section informs us that

by the year 2025, 83% of the expected global population of 8.5 billion will be living in developing countries ... Agriculture has to meet this challenge, mainly by increasing production on land already in use.... Major adjustments are needed ... to create the conditions for sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD).⁸

Furthermore, the UN Economic and Social Council’s report *Agriculture, Land and Desertification* states,

it is estimated that, at the close of the twenty-first century, more than 820 million people in the world remain undernourished ... About 75 per cent of the poor live in rural areas.... Increased resources, new solutions and vigorous action in support of rural communities are urgently needed to address the global challenges and overcome the constraints on development faced by ... small farmers.... Issues for further consideration at the national level include: ... A shift from a response-oriented approach towards longer-term proactive operations of vulnerability reduction and protection aimed at promoting sustainable development.⁹

To ignore these realities in the development of initiatives such as DIVERSE would be to perpetuate the rights gap described between different nations. DIVERSE could well be one of the “longer-term proactive operations of vulnerability reduction and protection aimed at promoting sustainable development.” To understand how, it is necessary to consider the importance of what could be described as “human sustainability.”

Human Sustainability: The Utilization and Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities

It is clear that every possible human resource must be mobilized if we are ever to resolve the most basic issues of survival experienced by such a high percentage of the world’s population. A trained veterinarian is an extremely valuable human resource and one that should not be wasted even if, at some stage, he loses the ability to perform every function.

This fits in with the perception of sustainability promoted by the UN:

Of particular concern is the continuing misconception that sustainable development is mostly about the environment.... Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there has been increasing recognition that a curriculum oriented towards sustainability would place good citizenship among its primary objectives.¹⁰

As it is often considered that a core function of a good citizen is to serve society, it is natural that a veterinarian who

becomes disabled would still wish to use her skills to do this. Likewise, a young disabled person who has a burning desire to become a veterinarian should be able to do so if this is at all possible. Even if not all young disabled people become socially active, they are likely to understand the rights gap issue better than their non-disabled peers and, therefore, to be more ready to diminish this gap by their own professional activity.

The United Nations Gateway to Social Policy and Development: Persons with Disabilities

Another aspect of UN work that focuses on the utilization and rehabilitation of disabled people is the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons, adopted by the UN General Assembly just over 20 years ago. This is

a global strategy to enhance disability prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities which pertains to full participation of persons with disabilities in social life and national development.¹¹

Within a section describing the “Human Rights Instruments Specifically Related to Disability,” reference is made to the 1989 UN Resolution 44/70, known as the Tallinn Guidelines for Action on Human Resources Development in the Field of Disability, which aim

to promote the human resources development of disabled persons. Guideline 6 states that human resource development “... is a process centred on the human person that seeks to realise the full potential and capabilities of human beings.” The Guidelines outline a series of strategies ... In particular, Guideline 33 provides that “... disabled persons have the right to be trained for and to work on equal terms in the regular labour force.”¹²

Efforts of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in Support of Rural Disabled Persons

Agenda 21 is the UN’s comprehensive plan of action to be taken in every area in which human life impacts upon the environment. Chapter 14 relates to sustainable agriculture and rural development, for which the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN is responsible. Within the regional FAO office for Asia and the Pacific, situated in Bangkok, a Rural Development Officer acts as a focal point on disability matters within the rural development section. The FAO Web site states that

FAO has a strong commitment to ensure full participation of rural disabled in its food security and poverty alleviation programmes and activities ...¹³

Although much of this work is clearly aimed at poorer disabled farmers and does not apply to disabled veterinarians, the same Web site describes a range of activities that could relate to them—and to which they could contribute. Publications and papers listed include references to

- blind disabled people and the Thai rural economy
- motor disabled people in rural areas of Vietnam
- motor and upper limb disabled people in agricultural industry in Sri Lanka

- sensorially disabled people in rural areas of Japan
- the status of motor disabled people within the agricultural and rural sector in Cambodia
- case studies on rural disability in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand
- Integrating people with a disability in employment opportunities and income-generating activities in the agricultural and agro-industry sectors in Cambodia

US Efforts in Support of Rural Disabled Persons

Since many people assume that the veterinary environment is necessarily a hostile one for people with disabilities, it will no doubt be a surprise to learn of the above initiatives. However, there has also been very advanced work taking place in the United States within the National AgrAbility Project.

Created in 1991, AgrAbility links the federal and state Extension Services with nonprofit disability service organizations to provide information, education, and technical assistance to heighten public awareness about persons with disabilities employed in agriculture. Eighteen states have USDA-funded AgrAbility Projects.¹⁴

Once again, it has not been possible to find references to the involvement of disabled veterinarians. However, there would be obvious benefits in linking these initiatives to the work being carried out in veterinary schools to integrate students with disabilities. The wealth of experience gained in both sectors could now be combined in order to contribute to global efforts toward sustainable agriculture and rural development. At the same time, veterinary students with disabilities could benefit from the painstaking work now being done to ensure that farmers—whether rich or poor—can earn a living and retain their dignity as workers.

Veterinarians with Disabilities: The New Sophistication of Human Duties?

UK veterinary school staff will now spend the next two years trying to bring about the radical transformation of some aspects of veterinary education as required by disability legislation. Some may take inspiration and comfort from the ideas expressed above—no one should be under any illusion as to the difficulties of the tasks that will be presented to us by the DIVERSE initiative. However, the more people focus on the longer-term benefits and the worldwide repercussions, the easier it will be to overcome the daily, weekly, and monthly difficulties.

People with disabilities will play a major part in these strenuous efforts to bring about their rightful integration into the veterinary workplace. What can one ask of them in this process? If one is to work in accordance with the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one should also be prepared to recognize that this necessarily demands recognizing the corresponding human duties. These duties establish the limits within which rights must be constrained. The successful veterinarians with disabilities are those who understand their duties as well as their rights.

Apart from the more immediate aims of the new initiative, it may well be that DIVERSE will contribute to what could be described as “the new sophistication of human duties.”

This would undoubtedly be one of the most powerful ways of convincing cynics that there is most certainly a place on the global stage for veterinarians with disabilities.

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