

Welfare – A Personal View
ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE

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A PERSONAL VIEW OF ANIMAL WELFARE

A vegetarian vet? How can this be? As a contradiction in terms, it might sound on a par with an open-cast-mining conservationist – or should it? **Treat ‘em not eat ‘em** sounds OK to me as a working slogan and I have to say I feel a lot better for it, when dealing with the many wonderful creatures it is my pleasure to meet, in the course of my daily work. Dogs and cats, horses and cattle, sheep and pigs, snakes and parrots, zoo animals and exotics, monkeys and birds of prey all respond beautifully to natural therapies and appear to appreciate the efforts one puts in on their behalf. I feel a great deal more honest now, in the last few years, having turned away from eating the flesh of dead animals and being able to look my patients in the eye without my fingers crossed behind my back!

As a child, I was brought up by two very well-respected and excellent vets in a loving and active family and in a large farmhouse with a small-holding. I reared my own sheep flock from cade lambs, I had my own calves, ducks, geese, chickens and horses. Life was approaching many people's concept of idyllic. From a very tiny age I did all the work for these animals, including fencing, ditching, grassland management and, yes, slaughter or sale. I can remember justifying this to my friends (also meat eaters) who would ask, how can you do that? I could say quite honestly that I was prepared to eat them because I was prepared to kill and butcher them myself. I maintained this ethos throughout my formative years, caring for, administering to and humanely killing my animal friends. I am not going to say I enjoyed it, I most certainly didn't. There were times when I found it extremely difficult but I could justify it, believing that I needed to eat meat. I married Shelagh in 1980 and we continued this tradition of now organic farming, caring for animals and killing them for food, but we found ourselves eating less and less meat over the years. There was even one notable barbecue at our home when we both suffered acute gout, from eating a surfeit and we resolved to cut down our meat intake further. We could still justify to our friends and family that we could eat meat because we did the dirty work

ourselves, rather than commit our animals to frightening transport and inhumane slaughterhouses. The penny still didn't drop that our minds and bodies were moving away from what we now consider to be a misguided and unhealthy practice.

As a country vet, my animal-rearing skills and my agricultural learning, picked up from my parents' practice and from my studies at Cambridge, proved invaluable. I could relate to farmers and their problems, to animal health problems and to managerial ways of handling them and so forth. I found that, instead of being a drug vet, I was manipulating herd health mostly by dietetics and management. So too in my small animal practice. Natural medicine fitted in very well with this, but the holistic way of thinking, to which I aspired, did not yet embrace a rejection of meat eating as a way forward. My strong ethical, moral and physical commitment to organic farming kept a place for meat eating, since we need animal manure for soil fertility, don't we? I remembered even having quite vigorous discussions or arguments with a prominent advocate of vegetarianism, saying that vegetarianism was necessary neither for health nor for the good of the world and of its animals. One day changed all that. My body and mind were ready for a complete rethink but my consciousness had not yet realised it. We had found ourselves letting our animals get older and bigger before the fateful day but on one occasion, as I held the gun against a bullock's head, I said to Shelagh *'I can't do this'*. I handed her the gun and she found that she couldn't either. We looked at each other and said *'we're veggies then, aren't we?'*. That evening, as we discussed the day, we both expressed our fears of drooling at seeing people eating steaks. To our surprise, it was only a matter of days until we found we couldn't stomach even the thought of eating meat. This was a revelation. I would see a butcher's lorry on the motorway and find myself subconsciously wondering how it was allowed to drive in broad daylight, feeling the same sort of reaction as I do when I see a driver holding a mobile 'phone to an ear. This was such an extraordinary and rapid conceptual switch that I am still in wonderment at it, years later.

Why do we have to go through this slow process of development in our lives? Why are we able to do things in our lives that we are going to regret for evermore? Perhaps it is one of the blessings of life, that we can feel the pleasure and freedom, as we extricate ourselves from such dire situations. I enjoy vegetarian food. Shelagh is a fabulous cook. We eat well and do not begin to 'miss' meat, nor do we feel the need for 'meat substitutes' on the plate. We just eat veggie (or more nearly vegan in fact). I enjoy meeting animals, standing with them, exchanging breath, not hiding a part of my inner self. Animals return this in spades.

Welfare – A Personal View - AVMC

I still have to address anxieties on whether organic farming can feed the world (no problem if everyone were vegetarian). I need to know whether the crops would grow and feed the world, without all those farm animals to manure the ground. I need to know whether human manure could ever be rid of the heavy metals and chemical soup, that we put down ourselves and down our sewers, so that it could be used on the land with safety and wisdom. These questions are of vital importance to the future of mankind.

I still have to address the problem, often put to me, of whether I should attend intensive farms or other establishments, which exploit animals. I continue to feel that I should. I cannot change the world or such systems overnight. I cannot remove those animals from their uncomfortable existences at this moment. I can, on the other hand, help them to cope with it and to lead more comfortable and enjoyable lives. I can help them with natural medicine, and I can work to sow the seeds of a different philosophy in the minds of those who, feeling forced by economics (a result of the cheap food ethos), run such systems.

Because I am working in natural and holistic medicine, my mind has long been revolted by the needless savagery and poor science of animal experiments. I have long held the view that we should respect our fellow creatures. We should behave to them in a manner which shows them respect. We should strive towards responsible and sustainable stewardship of our all-providing planet. We should be thankful for our existence and for the gift of life and we should constantly strive to show that. I feel more completely at one with all those beliefs, now that I do not eat meat.

My first gift to animals, however, which I would like to be in a position to present on a silver salver, would be the end of animal experiments. Our 'civilisation' would be so enriched, spiritually, by this measure. A whole new way of dealing with animals would set foot on the prairies of human consciousness. Animal experiments cause pain and suffering of an intolerable nature and scale. The compassionate argument is clear. The practice survives in the face of this, however, because society is unaware of the scientific fraud that the bad science of the practice represents. There is **no scientific justification** for the continuance of this barbaric practice. I believe that no important medical discovery has ever depended upon experimentation on animals and neither do I expect that to happen in the future. Still our culture condones or even demands this misguided and immoral custom. Charities which fund animal experiments should be forced to declare this fact up front and all collectors should be in the know. In this way, prospective contributors can make their choice on an informed basis. How many tin-rattlers and fundraising campaigners actually know it is happening? How many benefactors, who dip into their pockets on the streets, realise that they are funding not only misery, on a grand scale, for millions of the world's creatures but also horrific dangers and suffering for the

inevitable human victims? When I receive appeals in the post, I write to the charities involved, asking if they fund animal experiments. Often they will write back and justify the habit, with some meaningless and hackneyed phraseology, stating that they are quite willing to take my money and earmark it for some other purpose, not connected to animal experiments. No dice! That would only release other funds to be put into fraudulent animal experiments.

Animal welfare is fast becoming a respectable topic. Lobbying organisations that were once considered freaks and anarchists are fast becoming acceptable. Despite this, we continue to cherish many established practices; we just tweak them for the critics instead of reviewing our whole approach to animals. We should put each and every system, in which animals are involved, under an objective philosophical, scientific and moral microscope, to see if we have the right to continue it at all.

We consider ourselves to be the intelligent species on this planet but we ignore the evidence to the contrary. Globalisation, GMO's, commerce versus common sense, exploitation versus sustainability, disdain versus respect, those are our current legacy. Intelligent? What do animals do, to wreck the world or to exploit? We must be more like them, in our attitude to our wonderful planet. We **must** learn (to steal a phrase from native North American culture) to walk more lightly on the earth in all our doings, or our 'intelligent' species will lose its right to inherit the world.

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