

'We need to engage with rather than alienate those who criticise the farming industry'

Emily Craven argues that, when considering the vegan debate, farm animal practitioners should seek to understand and work with those who criticise the industry to drive improvements in farming standards, rather than alienate and dismiss them.

IN a recent debate article, Leanne Dalton suggested that in order to fulfil our RCVS oath – to 'ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care' – we, as veterinary professionals, should adopt veganism, and she questioned whether it was contradictory to 'perform life-saving surgery on one animal to then eat a chicken sandwich straight after'.¹ Both my personal and professional life have been dedicated to farming, and I'm a passionate advocate for British agriculture. I love and care about farm animals deeply. It's because I feel like this, that I can embrace the irony of performing abdominal surgery on a cow, and then enjoying a steak or adding milk to my coffee afterwards. For me, if that animal has a good life and a good death then I can rationalise the full farm-to-fork concept.

I truly believe that I can use my RCVS oath to advocate for my patients, and feel more empowered to make a difference to animal welfare than I perceive my colleagues in companion animal medicine to be able to do so. After all, animal welfare legislation is far easier to enforce in a farming setup, where all animals and holdings are registered and inspected regularly under the umbrella of regulatory bodies, than for companion animals, where regulation is much less apparent and animals can get lost in the system.

Furthermore, livestock farmers are passionate about their animals, with the vast majority taking their role of guardians and custodians of the land incredibly seriously, and this helps shape my ethical decision making.

However, with this passion we cannot evade challenge. Society has evolved and there is a real gulf between rural and urban, which I believe is growing

ever bigger. Most of the population is now remote from agriculture and, with that, attitudes and perspectives change. For many, farming practices do not and will not become normalised. As an industry we are in danger of closing ranks against challenge; instead of embracing questioning, we instantly become defensive against the perceived ignorance and attack on our way of life. We need to engage with our critics and educate rather than alienate.

A proportion of the UK's population is vegan, and an even bigger proportion has some reservations about eating meat. These are life choices and they are not wrong. As vets, we require and desire a diverse profession, and society too thrives on diversity, which brings different perspectives and opinions. These should always be respected; society would never evolve without embracing a growth mindset and respecting opposing viewpoints.

Frustrating as it may be, we should never accuse someone of being wrong when they offer an opinion, as this is not the basis of valid and successful debate, and is certainly not what would be expected of trained veterinary professionals. Instead, we should engage in respectful discussion, listen, understand and consider opposing opinions. If we can justify everything we do and sleep at night then great, but if not then we should consider reviewing our processes.

As our knowledge evolves, so do our standards. There is plenty in farming that we could, should and do improve. Tail docking is a good example; it was routinely undertaken in the pig sector but with increasing knowledge of animal behaviour, as well as knowing more about enrichment strategies and additional risks, such as postoperative neuroma formation, it is no longer considered acceptable as a routine procedure. To dock pigs, a farmer

needs permission and additional risk assessments and protocols in place. Essentially, the welfare cost is acknowledged and a need for a greater benefit must be required.

We need to apply the same attitude when considering the vegan debate. Instead of automatically defending what we do and criticising other people's viewpoints, we should engage with them, defending where appropriate, but without fear to acknowledge and refine imperfection as well. Dietary choices are not black and white, and, ultimately, if there were clear answers as to whether a vegan lifestyle is best for animal welfare (notwithstanding the environmental and sustainability arguments) then we wouldn't be having this debate.

I am a passionate agriculturist with strong core principles on welfare and our legacy to the industry, but I urge my colleagues in the farming profession to embrace challenge, respect differing opinions and educate rather than alienate those who seek to understand more about what we do.

Despite right to roam and extensive footpaths, the countryside and farming is not accessible to all. Plenty don't want to engage with agriculture and just want cheap and available food which is fine, but those who do want to ask questions and understand more about the farming industry should be welcomed. Furthermore, discussion about dietary choices is here to stay, so we should seek to understand the opposing arguments and work with them rather than dismiss them.

So, in summary, do we, as vets, have a moral obligation to be vegan? On that my answer is a resounding no. However, do we have a moral obligation to listen to the reasoning and respect the opinions of someone asking if we should adopt veganism? On this my answer is a resounding yes. ●



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Emily Craven

Emily Craven is a farm vet in East Anglia.

Reference

- 1 Dalton L. Do we have a moral obligation to be vegan? *Vet Rec* 2022;190:423