



## Real veterinarians don't wear helmets

Role, tasks and responsibilities of veterinarians in public health

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### Role of Veterinarians in the food chain

Veterinarians are commonly perceived by the public in their traditional role as caretakers of companion animals and livestock. However, one very important and often underestimated part of their field of activity is the work in *food hygiene* and therefore *public health*.

The work in food hygiene is often not seen as "real" veterinary work. However, wholesome safe food, whether meat, milk or eggs, comes from healthy animals and the veterinary profession are the obvious experts in determining the health status of the farmed livestock. In addition, the training of veterinarians covers the broad spectrum of subjects essential in ensuring consumer safety. These include knowledge of animal diseases, microbiology, epidemiology, veterinary medicinal products and hygiene as well as the ability to see the relationship of these factors to human health makes the veterinary profession uniquely qualified to assess the safety of food of animal origin and to protect consumers.

The food poisoning statistics demonstrate the risks of acquiring diseases as a result of consuming unsafe meat, milk, cheese, eggs or fish and rightly cause concern to many consumers. They also highlight the need for educated professionals with the ability to assess the health risks and establish processes that will reduce or eliminate these public health threats which national and European food poisoning statistics confirm to be high.

### Veterinary tasks and responsibilities in the food chain

As stated, food of animal origin should come from healthy animals whose on farm husbandry has ensured that they were kept under clean and animal welfare friendly conditions and that the food product produced is free from residues of veterinary medicinal products, pesticides or herbicides. The veterinarian is competent to give advice at all phases of the food chain. This commences on the farm with controls of the feed, the hygiene-standards (e.g. during milking) and the traceability of animals. Traceability is important if sick animals are to be prevented from entering the food chain. The veterinarian on the farm or the veterinarian at the place of slaughter carry out a physical examination and if necessary further tests in order to confirm that each animal is fit for slaughter.

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Veterinarians working in food hygiene also ensure that the animal welfare during transport to slaughter facilities and during the slaughter process itself meets acceptable standards through, including, for example, correct stunning of the animal before slaughter.

Veterinarians are widely involved in the construction and approval procedure for food processing facilities. Some are also involved in developing food safety policy and food safety management systems which may include aspects of the impact of the farm or business on the environment. Good layout and design of food manufacturing establishments is essential for the achievement of hygienic standards.

Every establishment that slaughters animals or poultry for food has an Official Veterinarian present throughout the slaughter process who ensures that the required standards of animal welfare, animal health and hygiene are maintained. Every carcass receives an inspection after slaughter and evisceration by either a veterinarian or an inspector under his/her supervision. Meat showing any sign of disease, parasites or any other hazards that could be harmful for the consumer are excluded from the food chain. In addition, if there is any evidence of abnormalities, further testing for bacteria, for example campylobacter, salmonella, parasites such as trichinella and also chemical hazards (e.g. residues, contaminants) is carried out.

The veterinarian's work and responsibility doesn't end at on farm or at the door of the slaughterhouse. Control of the chilling of food during storing, processing and retail as well as the hygiene of places where food is handled may also be part of veterinary work in food hygiene. This does not only include meat and meat products but all foods of animal origin including milk, eggs and fish.

In conclusion, veterinarians through the breadth of their education cover every aspect of food hygiene. The term **"from farm to fork"** summarizes very well how important it is to have healthy animals on farms and to ensure high standards during the steps which follow when food is produced from those animals. Only this can ensure that safe food of high quality is provided to the consumer.