FVE online spring meeting

Evaluating the impact of COVID on the veterinary profession

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional spring general assembly of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) – due to be held in London this year – was cancelled and replaced by an online meeting on 5 June, followed by some 100 colleagues from all over Europe. Not surprisingly, COVID-19 was at the forefront of the agenda.

‘All European vets have been impacted by COVID-19 to a greater or lesser degree,’ reported FVE president Rens van Dobbenburgh. ‘However, there are differences between countries and sectors.’ Surveys in different countries showed that companion animal veterinarians were particularly affected. ‘In April, many countries – including Spain, Italy, France and the UK – only urgent and emergency treatment was allowed, which had a great impact on the loss of clients and revenue.’ In other countries, such as Iceland, Germany and Austria, practices could stay open, as long as they respected social distancing and hygiene measures.

Farm animal practice was less affected, and in some countries, the workload even increased because farmers were spending more time with their animals.

Profession: consequences and initiatives
At the FVE, time and resources were mainly focused on COVID. ‘We supported our member organisations in explaining to the authorities why vets should be considered essential service suppliers and should be allowed to keep working. And that, due to the length of the lockdown measures, limiting veterinary work to emergency services only could lead to potentially serious animal health and welfare issues’, reported Nancy De Briyne, FVE Deputy Executive Director.

Together with FECAVA, two practice posters were produced, for practitioners and for pet owners, as well as a leaflet on maintaining mental health, which was translated into many
The FVE also closely followed the impact of COVID on animal welfare through the mapping that is being created by the OIE EmVetNet in collaboration with Lincoln University. One of the impacts on animal welfare was the overcrowding due to disruption of the food chain supply – with all restaurants closed, consumer demand had radically changed. During the meeting of the Union of European veterinary practitioners (UEVP), increased demand for puppies and kittens, and thereby an increase of illegal trade, was also mentioned.

One Health: can we do better?
The One Health approach took time to start, she noted. ‘While vets reached out immediately reached out to their human colleagues to help (equipment, testing, task force), the medical profession was a bit slow to recognise the added value that vets could provide’ – even though this changed over time in some countries. To highlight the role of veterinarians in One Health, a webinar called ‘COVID-19 and One Health: can we do better?’ will be organised on 8 July, in collaboration with the Federation of European Academies of Medicine (FEAM).

All in all, the veterinary profession, although impacted, adapted and ‘showed resilience’, she concluded. ‘As a profession, we have been working together better than ever – while staying apart. This is exactly why we have an organisation like FVE.’

Telemedicine and the veterinary-client-patient relationship
The lockdown also gave a boost to telemedicine: In the UK, the government temporarily allowed remote prescribing, while in France, an 18-month pilot had been launched. ‘In most countries, human doctors have embraced telemedicine to improve healthcare services,’ added Marc Veilly (France), chair of the FVE Statutory bodies working group, which had drafted a position paper. ‘Telemedicine is not new: vets have been practising it with clients for decades, mainly by telephone, email and social media.’ According to the draft position paper, telemedicine should be allowed in the context of a physical veterinary-client-patient relationship.

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3. [https://lmu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_beo5EWJBY879FiZ](https://lmu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_beo5EWJBY879FiZ)
relationship. The paper covers four areas: remote consulting, remote diagnosing, remote prescribing and third-party generated data.

Coming up: position papers on anaesthesia, cannabis
The FVE medicines working group announced it was working on a position paper to define anaesthesia of animals as a veterinary act. ‘An increasing number of countries are placing anaesthesia in the hands of laypeople,’ warned Rens van Dobbenburgh. ‘Some of the products, such as isoflurane, require specific safety precautions.’ The paper, which will explain why anaesthetics should only be used by veterinarians or under their direct supervision, is up for electronic adoption in the next weeks. The group is also working on a position paper on the veterinary use of cannabis and cannabis-derived products.

Other ‘medicines’ topics included an update on EU legislation and the development of an EU product and pharmacovigilance (adverse events) database\(^5\), including the revamping of the current EU adverse event database. ‘Much information can be found here, but there is still room for improvement.’ In particular, the total number of treatments was lacking, which made the information more difficult to interpret, he added.

Working group on food safety… and sustainability
FVE board member Thierry Chambon (France) gave an update on the EU Animal Health Law, due to come into force in April 2021. However, ‘due to COVID, some delay should be expected.’ The Official Controls Regulation, which entered into force last December, and the temporary provisions to deal with COVID ‘has introduced electronic certification to replace paper documents — a great advantage during this period of lockdown.’ He also announced the set-up of the new Working group on food safety and sustainability (formerly WG on food safety and quality), chaired by Simon Doherty (UK). The name change also meant an extended remit, which will now also cover sustainability, such as the circular economy and the wellbeing of official veterinarians.

Veterinary education: looking to the future
In the field of education, a working group had been set up on digital technologies and artificial intelligence, Stanislaw Winiarczyk (FVE board) reported. It is a joint initiative of the European board of veterinary specialisation (EBVS), the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) and FVE, which is represented by Denis Avignon (France), Volker Moser (Austria) and Despoina Iatridou (FVE office). Its mandate is ‘to investigate the impact of digital technologies on veterinary education and practice.’ VetCEE, which was established to set the standard for middle-tier programmes, has been asked to increase its remit with the following three objectives: become a leader in accrediting CPD quality; set up a system of mutual recognition of CPD across Europe; and extend the scope of the mission to accredit all kinds of CPD providers and disciplines. Its new strategy is expected to be adopted by the end of the year.

Animal welfare to be part of the FVE strategy
The Animal Welfare Working Group was working on two position papers, FVE board member Torill Moseng (Norway) reported, namely on finding more sustainable systems instead of

farrowing crates for sows and enriched cages for hens. Together with FEEVA, a protocol was being set up for horse euthanasia and carcase disposal. She added that the working group was also preparing an overall animal welfare strategy, to help clarify the role of the veterinarian in animal welfare matters. The strategy would become an integral part of the FVE strategy 2021-2025.

The FVE strategy is currently being prepared and discussed and will be presented for adoption in November, Jan Vaarten FVE executive director recalled. He also announced his retirement at the end of the year.

And also...

This year, the Union of European Veterinary Practitioners (UEVP) will celebrate its 50th anniversary, UEVP president Piotr Kwieciński announced. The event is scheduled for the coming general assembly in Prague, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Czech Veterinary Chamber. ‘Yes – we’re going for a physical meeting in Prague, we all hope to meet you then, FVE president Rens van Dobbenburgh added, ‘even though we don’t know what the world will look like by then…’. His closing words were followed by a ‘good-bye’ from dozens of mini-screens.

Next general assembly (planned) in Prague, 6 and 7 November 2020.

K. de Lange