

Celebrate the Veterinarians Unsung Heroes of Our Society

SHRIDHAR speaks



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Not many would know that 26th April, 2025 is World Veterinary Day; it is the last Saturday of April, the day celebrated as such to honour the important role veterinarians play in protecting animal health, public health, and the environment. The celebrations are muted, confined to the associations of veterinarians, veterinary institutions and such sundry organisations. Ironically, the public at large continues to be indifferent to the veterinary profession despite the fact that a veterinarian protects the public health and environment too besides his avowed role of an animal doctor. Established by the World Veterinary Association (WVA), this day recognises the role of veterinary professionals in improving animal health and welfare, ensuring food safety, and advancing scientific research, and seeks to foster global appreciation for veterinarians' contributions to society.

WVA has announced to observe the theme "Animal Health Takes a Team" in the World Veterinary Day 2025. This theme aims to highlight the collaborative nature of veterinary practice and underscore the essential role that multiple professionals play in delivering high-quality veterinary services. It goes on to elaborate, "the theme focuses on the importance of teamwork in veterinary care, acknowledging that effective veterinary services often

rely on the collective efforts of a range of professionals, including veterinary nurses, technicians, researchers, and other allied health professionals. The WVA Council selected this theme to shine a spotlight on the dynamic nature of veterinary services, which require cooperation and collaboration across various fields of expertise to address the diverse challenges in animal health and care. By working together, veterinary teams can ensure the highest standards of care and support for animals, their owners, and the globe." Vasudaiva Kutumbukam in other words.

The word veterinary is derived from the Latin 'veterinae' meaning beasts of burden or working animals; hence, during the ancient times it was typically associated with the two such animals, the cattle and horses. Historical evidence indicates that veterinary medicine originally developed, along with human medicine, in response to the needs of pastoral and agricultural man. The evidence further points towards the likely existence of the veterinary profession throughout a large area of Africa and Asia in around 2000 BC. Ancient Egyptian literature includes monographs on both animal and human diseases. Evidence of the parallel development of human and veterinary medicine is found in the writings of Hippocrates on medicine and of Aristotle, who described the symptomatology and therapy of the diseases of animals, including man. In fact, the ancient Greek philosopher and physician Hippocrates, considered one of the most outstanding figures in the history of medicine and traditionally referred to as the "Father of Medicine" in recognition of his lasting contributions to the field, was the first in the recorded history of civilisation to recognise the relationship between human and animal health. The central idea of Hippocratic philosophy is the principle of wholeness, that knowledge of nature is possible only when it is correctly

approached as a whole; in a nutshell it recognises that human health, animal health and environmental health are part of a whole. Early Greek scholars discovered parallels and similarities of medical problems among the many animal species, and thus taught both human and veterinary medicine. Alexander the Great, in the 4th century BC, designed programs involving the study of animals. Several medical writings of the Romans establish that some of the most important early observations and scientific studies on the natural history of disease were made by scholars who wrote chiefly about agriculture, particularly the aspect involving domesticated animals.

While the term veterinarian is believed to have first made an appearance in written documents in 1646, the ancient Indian sage and veterinary physician Shalihotra, mythologically estimated to have existed circa 2350 BCE, too is believed to be the founder of veterinary sciences. The ancient scriptures and texts make a specific mention that animals and humans are a part of the same cosmos. Charvaka, Susutra and Harita Samhitas are ancient Indian medical treatises emphasising the critical importance of protecting animal health and promptly attending to animal diseases, thus drawing, in the ancient times, parallels between human and animal health.

Our predecessors recognised and respected the immense contribution of veterinary science. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to learn that veterinary science preceded health science, as did veterinary medicine. The global community realised the importance of protecting animal health way earlier to the recognition of the same global effort for addressing human health concerns. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that global collaboration in animal health found institutional expression through the World Organization of Animal Health (WOAH) as early as in the year 1924

whereas the World Health Organisation (WHO) was established in 1948. And at home, today's Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) was created in the year 1889, albeit in a different moniker, and its counterpart the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) came into existence more than two decades later in 1911. It may be worthwhile to record here that the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) too was a successor, and not a precursor, to the IVRI, having been established in 1905. There is little historical evidence to explain how veterinary science got overshadowed by health science, and its expanded sector animal husbandry got subsumed in agriculture.

The work of Louis Pasteur is of fundamental significance in the evolution of veterinary science as it raised concern for foods of animal origin leading to the study of microorganisms and their identification with diseases in man and other animals. The veterinary profession assumed a major role in food-hygiene programs and gradually, the eradication of animal diseases, rather than their control, became increasingly important. Today, combating zoonoses and contributing to assured, hygienic, safe and nutritious food supply have become the indispensable services of veterinary science.

In the face of demographic challenges, increased international trade and the effects of climate change, animal health is more fundamental than ever to the development and well-being of human populations around the world. Livestock constitutes 40% of the value of global agriculture, and supports the income and livelihoods of one fifth of the global population, mostly in developing countries. Obviously, animal diseases can significantly impact the economy and livelihood of a vast multitude. The global burden of animal diseases, though difficult to measure, is huge. It quite evidently leads to a burden of human diseases, impacts food security, dents the economy etc., but as the current ongoing pandemic has demonstrated it also strikes at the basic fabric of society and its lifestyles: a zoonotic micro pathogen had recently brought the entire mankind on its knees and forced it into a self imposed lockdown. This should surely build a strong case for strengthening the veterinary institutions and services. The most effective and economic approach to protecting human health is to control zoonotic pathogens at their animal source. Not only does it call for close institutionalised and harmonized collaboration at local, regional and global level between the veterinary, health and environmental governance, but also greater investment in the animal health infrastructure. Developing



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countries like ours have much greater stakes in strong One Health systems on account of small agricultural holdings and mixed farming systems resulting in uncomfortably close proximity of animals and humans. This builds a strong case for health and disease surveillance to incorporate domestic animals, livestock and poultry too. Humans require a regular diet of animal protein from milk, eggs, meat etc., and protein deficiency is a public health concern. Thus loss of food animals on account of its poor health or disease too becomes a public health issue even though there may be no disease transmission; and we lose 20% of our animals this way. A veterinarian today, therefore, protects the health of both animals and people. Besides addressing the health concerns, the welfare needs of every species of animal too are his domain. Moreover, as a manager of animal husbandry, he also plays critical

roles in rural livelihoods and economy, environmental protection, food safety, and hence public health.

A medical doctor is, quite often and deservedly, treated as a God. A Veterinarian too is a doctor, and unlike his counterpart, always on house call; he is also a nutritionist, a farmer, a manager, an economist, a livestock production advisor etc. but still not given a divine treatment. Isn't the Veterinarian the best and the most skilful doctor in the world? He does not enjoy the luxury of questioning his patients as to what the ailment or simply the matter is. He has just got to know and diagnose, without any benefit of verbal communication. Not only has he to be a dexterous medical professional but also a communicator of divine insight. Let us remember, on this World Veterinary Day, to respect the Veterinarians as they protect our health too.