

PROFESSION CAN NO LONGER KNOW, ABHOR AND IGNORE PEDIGREE ISSUE

THERE are certain topics that observers of human behaviour are meant to avoid.

There is no available authors' rulebook, but, osmotically, one is expected to understand these constraints and avoid such topics unless writing specifically about them. One such topic is religion and another is politics. However, I cannot see how one can broach the topic of breeding without mentioning Christianity as, surely, one of the basic tenets of following the principles of Christianity is to treat all the creatures with which we share this planet with dignity and respect.

Let's not get into the details and the nuances of how faiths might differ, but – at the very least – civilised human behaviour accepts that human kind doesn't have the right to treat other creatures cruelly. This is slightly tricky, because we have many different views on what is acceptable and what is cruel. For all of us, however, there should be a point where certain activities are unacceptable in practice.

Call it morality, if you wish, but even in our self-indulgent, hedonistic world, some things should simply not be countenanced – yet we routinely accept them in a form of passive endorsement. This action is, in itself, counter to the basic tenets of Christianity, if I can recall accurately what I was taught in Sunday school half a century ago.

The trouble is, by walking past



it, by not speaking out and by accepting the activities without condemning them, I am as guilty as those who practise cruelty to other creatures.

Intolerable practices

Today is my coming out; my belated decision to stand up against intolerable practices. But instead of feeling good about it, I just feel guilty.

What is this ubiquitous wrong? Nothing more or less than the vanity of mankind manifest in the injudicious breeding of pet cats and dogs. "Oh that," you might say. "That's nothing new; we know all about that." Of course we do, but – for once – there's a spark of momentum behind the opportunity to effect a change for the better with the furore about a BBC television programme that took the lid off the pedigree dog breeding business and the current indecision, on the part of the BBC, whether to screen Crufts in future.

Typically, the style of coverage by the programme (*Pedigree Dogs Exposed*) was sensationalist, veering from the delights of verbal entrapment of a breeder and winning cavalier King Charles spaniel exhibitor to a crash course

in eugenics and Hitler's Aryan dream. The end result, however, was a nation of television viewers that now knows some of what the veterinary profession knows and abhors. Knows and abhors and passively tolerates.

Responsible breeding

Of course, we need to breed responsibly – the profession understands this and knows what should be done to widen the gene pool to arrest the rapid slide towards the destruction of a number of breeds in cats and dogs. Everyone understands the frustration that stems from the practitioner's inability to act alone; to make a difference and to persuade individual breeders of the scientific folly of certain practices. Yet, what is to stop the profession from acting collectively; from uniting behind the BVA in condemning the worst excesses and from putting pressure on their governing body to require breeders to change? What is the point of new animal welfare legislation if we continue to turn a blind eye to the worst of these breeding practices?

Our preferred option of a watching brief is unacceptable. After years of dithering, the



Breeds such as the cavalier King Charles spaniel (above) featured in a BBC programme that, says Chanticleer, took pedigree dog issues to an audience far wider than the veterinary profession.

majority of the profession finally stood up against tail docking and can do so again to support a drive towards responsible breeding with a checklist of unacceptable practices that it believes should be outlawed.

There is an argument – there always is – that by doing nothing we won't drive these practices underground, but isn't that like saying that we've been right to turn a blind eye towards president Mugabe's madness because we didn't want to upset him?

There, I've done it again – I've mentioned another of the unmentionable topics I should have avoided. I don't know about you, but I've spent a lifetime trying not to mention the

unmentionable and it hasn't really achieved anything other than to make me feel uncomfortable in my impotence. I don't want to be uncomfortable any more and I don't want to see another decade of boxers that are the oncologist's nightmare or Maine coons whose hips are so bad they cannot climb the stairs.

Resolute BVA

What I do want to see is the profession standing behind a vibrant and resolute BVA, because this issue really does matter.

It provides us with one of those rare opportunities in which we can be seen to be making a difference and to be seen to care enough to do something about

it. If we believe that "first, do no harm" is the correct moral position for our profession then surely we should feel strongly enough to require those who set the standards for breeders to embrace the same moral imperative. Alternatively, we can all go back to work with a sigh and enjoy the tiny frisson of intellectual superiority that flares briefly with the next encounter with flawed genetic manipulation of pet species.

If, however, the difference between man and the rest of creation is that we have a conscience and understand the concept of morality, should we not take the lead in broadcasting the concept of "first, do no harm"? ■

DELEGATES DISCUSS SUICIDE TOPICS

THE 12th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour (ESSSB) took place this year in Glasgow.

ESSSB is the largest and most prestigious suicidology conference in Europe and is recognised as one of the most influential in the world, bringing together leading academics, policy makers and practitioners from across the globe. The conference aims to promote cutting-edge research to stimulate new thinking, to share insights and expertise, and to enhance mutual learning of science, policy and practice. More than 350 delegates from 37 countries were welcomed to the conference. There were more than 400 oral and poster presentations at the event.

David Bartram, a veterinary surgeon researching suicide and mental health in the veterinary profession – in association with the University of Southampton's School of Medicine – delivered an oral presentation called "Veterinary surgeons and suicide: a

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reports on his presentation to a congress discussing suicide and suicidal behaviour, during which he referred extensively to the profession

hypothetical model to explain risk". He told delegates that veterinary surgeons were at high risk of suicide, with a proportional mortality ratio around four times that of the general population and around twice that of other healthcare professions.

Although there had been much speculation regarding mechanisms of increased suicide risk in the profession, there was very little empirical research, he explained.

A review of current knowledge about possible influences on the suicide rate among veterinarians, and factors elevating the risk in other occupations and in the general population, was used to propose a hypothetical model to explain suicide risk

in veterinary surgeons. Based on testable constructs, it attempted to clarify a complex interaction of possible mechanisms across the career life, and facilitate a more focused approach to research.

Work-related stressors

Such mechanisms include the characteristics of individuals entering the profession, negative effects during undergraduate training, work-related stressors (such as long working hours, inadequate support, emotional exhaustion, client expectations and unexpected clinical outcomes), ready access to and knowledge of means (medicines are typically stored in practice premises and deliberate self poisoning is the most common

method of suicide in both male and female veterinarians), stigma associated with mental illness, professional and social isolation, and alcohol or drug misuse (mainly prescription drugs, to which the profession has ready access, such as ketamine, benzodiazepines and opiates).

Contextual effects, such as attitudes to death and euthanasia (formed through the profession's routine involvement with euthanasia of companion animals and slaughter of farm animals), and suicide contagion (due to direct or indirect exposure to suicide of peers within this small profession) are other possible influences.

Research is required to validate the model and to inform the development and timing of appropriate interventions. A cross-sectional study to determine the prevalence of psychological morbidity using standard instruments and to identify psychosocial risk factors in the profession's work environments

has recently been completed; the results are being prepared for publication.

There are now a number of initiatives planned and underway to develop an evidence base from which effective interventions can be developed to help reduce the levels of psychological distress in the veterinary profession.

The author believes high



The author provided a veterinary perspective to delegates.