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# *Quicklook at* **Vets**





### About Quicklook at Vets

**M**ILLIONS of us care for animals. Man's relationship with them is varied and complex. The work of vets reflects this and covers an enormous number of species.

Quicklook at Vets provides a fascinating insight into how vets do their work and the astonishing way in which this is developing. All main aspects are covered, from small family pets to farm animals and (sometimes very valuable) horses.

Find out what vets and veterinary nurses have to do to qualify. Get under the skin of a working practice. See what it does and how it is organised. What treatments are available? Are they affordable and justified?

What is the future of this fast evolving profession, which is so vital to our connection with the animal world?

Quicklook at

# *Vets*

Bob Lehner



Quicklook  
books

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# *Man and animals*



**O**UR association with, and exploitation of, animals extends as far back as human history itself. No matter how urbanised, or cut off from nature people become, they still retain their desire to share their lives with animals.

We have always kept and used animals for many different purposes. These include those historically reared for food or clothing, those used for transportation, to serve as beasts of burden, or to provide a source of power in agriculture. Others are kept for sporting and recreational purposes. Dogs are kept to guard us, or to work for us in other ways, whilst some animals are kept solely to be our companions.

Within these broad categories there is a wide range of species. For example, animals raised for food production across the world include cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, goats, reindeer, llamas, camels, buffalo, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, poultry and fish. Those used for transportation and agriculture include horses, donkeys, cattle, camels, buffalo, yaks and llamas. Horses, camels, dogs and birds are kept for sporting purposes, whilst those with a role as companions range from dogs, cats, rabbits and guinea pigs through to all manner of birds and reptiles.

It is interesting to note how different cultures make use of different species for these various purposes. Eating one kind of animal may be considered normal in one culture, but totally abhorrent in another. No self-respecting Englishman would even consider eating a dog, whereas this is quite acceptable in some Oriental countries. The Western tendency to share one's house, or even one's bed, with a dog would be considered quite inappropriate by many people from the Middle East.

The ever-expanding human population places more and more demands on food production. Whilst it is clear that mankind could exist

quite satisfactorily on a vegetarian diet, it is striking that as previously poor countries, such as India and China, achieve greater affluence, one of the first things their citizens want is an increased amount of meat in the diet. Thus livestock production is likely to be a high priority and will become more intensive and industrialised in areas of the world where it was previously conducted at a relatively low level.

In the West we now rather discount the use of animals for transportation and as a source of power in agriculture. However in many parts of the world horses, donkeys and draught cattle play a vital part in day-to-day life. Although these animals are very valuable to their owners, their health and welfare is often poor, largely due to the poverty and ignorance of the owners.

In our own society horses are now used almost entirely for recreational and sporting purposes and have been elevated to the same high status as our smaller pets. In many cases they lead a very privileged and cosseted lifestyle.

The role of animals as companions to humans is fascinating. In the Western world particularly, dogs and cats are often treated as one of the family and lavishly provided for. A recent survey suggests that there are some 10.5 million dogs and only slightly fewer cats in the UK and that 31% of households own dogs as compared to 26% with cats. Huge amounts of money are devoted to feeding them and tending to all their needs. This extends to their healthcare and as we shall see later, in some cases this can far exceed that available to many people in poorer parts of the world.

However, even though we are considered to be a nation of “animal lovers”, it is not all “good news” for pets in our country. In 2008-9 it was estimated that over 9,000 homeless dogs were euthanased in the UK, whilst Battersea Dogs’ Home in London took in over 11,000 lost, stray or unwanted animals.

It is interesting to note however, that even in impoverished third-world countries, dogs and cats often share their lives with humans, although economic factors limit the resources devoted to them.

In recent years the plight of the world’s wildlife has come under increasing scrutiny. Expanding human populations in many parts of the

world have squeezed wild animals into smaller and smaller habitats, such that their very survival is often threatened. Over-exploitation of species used for food, or poaching, has led to a vast reduction in numbers, or even extinction in some cases. Man-made pollution has wiped out other species.

The competition for resources between humans and wild animals means that many are facing extinction and their only hope of survival is either within strict conservation areas or alternatively in zoos.

The veterinary profession plays a vital role in all these areas, wherever the lives of humans and animals interact.



# *What is veterinary medicine?*



**V**ETERINARY medicine is the branch of medical science that applies to all animals other than the human species, responsibility for which is the preserve of the human medical profession.

It is concerned with the study of the whole spectrum of diseases affecting animals, caused by whatever means and their diagnosis, treatment and prevention. This is clearly a truly massive remit and therefore veterinary medicine mainly concentrates on those species of most direct importance to mankind.

“Disease” is any condition or process that adversely affects the normal physiological functions of all, or a part, of the body. Diseases are caused by exposure to harmful external or internal agents or factors.

External causes of disease include exposure to poisons and toxins, infection by viruses, bacteria or parasites, lack (or an excess) of food or essential food components such as vitamins and minerals, a lack of water or oxygen, exposure to extremes of temperature, radiation or trauma.

Internal causes of disease might include inherited or genetic defects, auto-immune disease (i.e. destruction of body tissues by the immune system), cancer (which may develop for many reasons), the ageing process and numerous others, many of which remain unknown to medical science.

Veterinary medicine is a composite of numerous different subjects and vets have to study topics as diverse as anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, nutrition, genetics, animal management, pathology, microbiology, parasitology and pharmacology as well as the more obvious clinical subjects of medicine, anaesthesia, radiology, animal breeding and surgery. Furthermore, the student has to consider these subjects as they apply to the whole range of relevant species. A degree in veterinary medicine is

arguably the most wide-ranging of any.

It is clear that the sum of knowledge is now so great that no single veterinary graduate could possibly claim to have expertise across such a wide field. Most vets now confine their activities to just a small number of species within their own particular area of interest.

One important group of diseases are those transmissible from animals to humans. These are known as zoonoses and many are of major importance. The veterinary profession plays a vital role in controlling these diseases, so as to safeguard human health. A classic zoonosis, which is well known and feared, is rabies. This disease, which is spread by carnivores such as dogs and foxes, is invariably fatal to humans once clinical signs have developed. Strict quarantine legislation helped to protect the UK from rabies since the early part of the 20th Century. Political pressures lead to a relaxation of this policy in the 1990s, when dogs and cats were allowed to travel freely between EU countries (albeit provided they were micro-chipped and vaccinated against rabies) and extreme vigilance will be required to ensure that rabies does not again become established in the UK.

Possibly the greatest medical trauma to hit the human species in the recent past has been HIV/AIDS. This was first recognised in the early 1980s and has now spread worldwide, infecting and killing many millions of people and causing enormous economic damage, particularly in Africa. The origins of the HIV virus remained obscure for many years, but it is now generally accepted that it is a variant of a similar virus affecting chimpanzees. It is likely that humans first became infected by hunting and eating wild chimpanzees in West Africa. Clearly this could not have been predicted, as the chimpanzee virus was unknown at the time, but it does show the danger of infectious agents crossing from one species to another.

In the UK, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (“BSE” or “mad cow disease”) is another disease where it is thought that the infectious agent jumped species, passing from sheep to cattle and then to humans. A vigorous and very expensive national campaign eventually eradicated it from cattle and fortunately the predicted epidemic in humans never materialised.

There are numerous other important zoonotic diseases worldwide, but attention has recently been drawn to mutants of the influenza virus originating from birds and pigs (avian and swine flu). There is every possibility, indeed some authorities say an inevitability, that mutation of these animal viruses will lead to major pandemics in the human population. Intensification of livestock production and the ease and speed with which humans (and animals) can travel freely around the world will be major factors in this unpalatable scenario. Extreme vigilance by the veterinary profession will be necessary to try and identify and eliminate these diseases before they become established and spread into the human population.

The remit of veterinary medicine is far reaching and vets play a major role in many important areas. This book is mainly concerned with the veterinary profession within the UK, but there is clearly a worldwide need for veterinary expertise and personnel.

## *About the author*

**B**OB LEHNER has worked with everything from hamsters to horses, as well as having had experience in the pharmaceuticals industry, commercial deer farming and zoo animals.

Bob was born and brought up in Kenya, coming to the UK in 1969 to study veterinary medicine at Edinburgh University.

After qualifying, he remained in Edinburgh and gained a PhD in parasite immunology. He then went into veterinary practice, where he spent most of his career as a partner in a multi-vet, mixed, hospital-based practice in Hertfordshire.

He retired from his position as senior partner in 2005, but continues to work part time in practice. He is also an inspector for the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme, which helps to regulate the profession.

Since retiring he has also worked with an animal charity in Botswana, neutering feral dogs.

Bob lives in Hertfordshire, where he and his wife share their lives with a horse, a dog, three cats and a house-rabbit.

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This book is for anyone who cares for animals or is interested in those who do so as a career. It explains the astonishing scope of the work that they can cover.

We find out how vets and veterinary nurses train and qualify. Vets are called upon to treat mice, elephants and everything in between, not forgetting our much loved dogs and cats. A vast range of treatments is available. We consider the challenges and implications.

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## About the author

**Bob Lehner** is highly qualified and has had vast experience as senior partner in a busy multi-vet mixed hospital-based practice.



He has worked with everything from hamsters to horses, as well as having experience with the pharmaceutical industry, commercial deer farming and zoo animals. He is an inspector with the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme.

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