Claude Bourgelat was born in Lyons, France, on 11 November 1712. His father was a wealthy trader who shared his time between Lyons and Livorno in Italy. Following his father’s death in 1719, Claude saw his family’s material wealth dwindle and its atmosphere deteriorate as a result of an expensive court case over the inheritance. This meant that Bourgelat began his adult life with very few resources. Between 1724 and 1729, he served as a Musketeer. Next we find him in Lyons, where he owned a law firm from 1733 to 1740, handling cases for Lyons’ gentry and nobility. Later, the relationships he formed in this local sphere of power were to help him to further his career.

**Founder of veterinary science**

On 29 July 1740, Bourgelat received his warrant as Equerry to the King and Principal of the Lyons Riding Academy, a position he held until 1765. In 1744, Bourgelat published his first book, *Le Nouveau Newcastle*. This treatise on horsemanship presented a new approach to the equestrian art that earned him considerable fame throughout Europe. When writing his book, Bourgelat noticed anomalies in previous descriptions of equine biomechanics. He attributed them to errors in anatomical knowledge at that time. This made him decide to devote himself to research in this field and, in so doing, he called upon the assistance of surgeons practising at the Lyons hospital, Hôtel-Dieu. His request was answered with interest and enthusiasm by Claude Pouteau and Jean-Baptiste Charmetton, both professors at the Lyons College of Surgery. From his collaboration with human doctors, the Equerry came to three realisations concerning the:

- difference between the empirical approach and scientific reasoning,
- similarity between ‘the human machine and the animal machine’,
- opportunity to create the profession of ‘animal doctor’.

Thus Bourgelat became a science writer. In 1750, he published the first volume of *Éléments d’Hippiatrique*. The book covers all the basics of anatomy, physiology, pathology, hygiene, treatment and even animal husbandry, including inspection prior to purchasing a horse. The author adopts a scientific approach to these subjects, based on experience, observation, reasoning, analysis and deduction. This was a novel approach that roundly rejected empiricism and its tenets.
In 1752, Bourgelat was appointed corresponding member of the Paris Academy of Science in recognition of the scientific worth of this scholar of the Age of Enlightenment. A friend of d’Alembert, Bourgelat was chosen to contribute articles on horses to the famous *Encyclopédie* (Encyclopaedia). In fact he wrote more than half the contents of the *Encyclopédie* relating to veterinary medicine and surgery.

The arrival in Lyons of Henri-Léonard Bertin in 1754 was a stroke of good fortune for Bourgelat. The young senior official had been appointed to the post of Administrator of the Lyons Region (Lieutenant de la Généralité – equivalent to Prefect of the Region in modern-day France). The two men quickly formed a close friendship that continued after Bertin left for Paris three years later to take up his new post as Lieutenant-Général de Police (chief of the Parisian police force). Very soon, Bertin was admitted to Court and furthered his brilliant career by becoming Comptroller General of Finance in 1763. However, even before he was promoted to this high office, he had succeeded in convincing King Louis XV of the benefit for the French Kingdom’s rural economy of creating a profession that could control the epizootics affecting livestock.

The decree of the King’s Council of 4 August 1761 authorised Bourgelat to open in the Lyons suburbs a veterinary school for ‘public instruction in the principles and methods for treating animal diseases, which will endow the Kingdom’s agriculture imperceptibly with the means for safeguarding livestock in places where this epidemic is ravaging the countryside’. Installed in a former coaching inn called Logis de l’Abondance (House of Plenty), the Lyons school welcomed its first student on 13 February 1762.

Bertin also wanted a veterinary school to be set up in Paris, with Bourgelat as Principal. A royal decree of 1 June 1764 appointed Bourgelat as Principal and Inspector General of the Royal Veterinary School of Lyons and of all existing and future veterinary schools in the Kingdom. Bourgelat set up in Paris at the end of June 1765. In the late summer of 1766, the Paris school reopened on the country estate of Château d’Alfort, which has remained the school’s headquarters to this day.

The foundation of the Lyons veterinary school, followed four years later by that of Alfort, had an impact Europe-wide. As soon as they were founded, Bourgelat admitted students from Switzerland, England, Sweden, Denmark, the Germanic States and Italy. Upon their return to their respective countries, these students extolled the French veterinary schools, as well as their founder, whom they described as the creator of the veterinary art. It was not long before the Master’s disciples in turn founded veterinary schools in all Europe’s major cities. Although a few of these schools were short-lived, most still exist today. In the second half of the 18th Century, a
total of 14 veterinary schools were opened in Europe.

Claude Bourgelat is therefore the undisputed founder of veterinary education, and hence of the veterinary profession, providing them with a legacy of three basic tenets:
- scientific method,
- economic rationale,
- comparative dimension.

Advocate of comparative pathobiology

Bourgelat’s legacy did not stop at animal medicine. He also pioneered the concept now known worldwide as ‘One Health’. Indeed, he laid the foundations for comparative pathobiology in the Encyclopédie where, in 1755, he wrote:

‘Human medicine is useful to equine medicine and vice versa’.

One year later, he stated in another Encyclopédie article:

‘The analogy of the body of human and animal as a mechanism [...] is truly constant, and straying from the road to the recovery of the former to seek new ways to cure the latter is to risk falling into criminal deviation’.

In the 1761 prospectus describing the Lyons veterinary school, entitled Art Vétérinaire ou Médecine des Animaux (Veterinary Art or Animal Medicine), Bourgelat asserted:

‘We would consider ourselves only too fortunate if those who are entrusted with people’s lives, convinced of the progress that their art can expect to derive from comparative medicine, were to deign to allow us to test [...] on animals that which prudence prevents them from testing on humans.’

In Bourgelat’s last publication, in 1777, entitled Règlement pour les Écoles Royales Vétérinaires (Rules for the Royal Veterinary Schools), which is his philosophical legacy, he confirmed the following principles.

‘We have realised the close relationship that exists between the human machine and the animal machine; it is a relationship such that each will mutually enlighten and perfect the other’.

‘The doors of our schools are open to all those whose duty it is to ensure the preservation of humans and who [...] have won the right to come to consult nature, seek analogies and test ideas which, when confirmed, may be of service to the human race’.

Claude Bourgelat is therefore well and truly the champion of comparative pathobiology, without whom the astonishing advances made in modern medicine over the past two centuries would never have been possible in so short a time.

Claude Bourgelat died in Paris on 3 January 1779, probably from an attack of gout, a disease from which he had suffered cruelly for almost 30 years. Without any doubt, he can be described as a visionary and a benefactor of humankind. Despite this, a mere handful of veterinarians in the world know of Bourgelat and his works. Unjustly and tragically, he is still largely unheard of. However, it is to be hoped that 2011, the year in which we commemorate the fruit of his genius, will provide us with the opportunity to right this wrong by introducing Bourgelat to the world at large.

Professor Jean-François Chary
President of the Vet2011 Animation and Coordination Committee