World Veterinary Day 2012 coincides with the 100th anniversary of the first veterinary school in Iran

World Veterinary Day is celebrated on 28 April each year to highlight the importance of the veterinary profession. World Veterinary Day is a global event, involving everyone from world leaders to the general public, which focuses on the huge range of activities undertaken by veterinarians across the globe. It is an opportunity to promote the many ways, familiar and unfamiliar, that veterinarians help to protect the health and welfare of both animals and people.

Each year a different theme is selected, emphasising a priority animal health concern. However, this year Iran had a special reason to celebrate. The first veterinary school in Iran was founded in Tehran in 1912, meaning that 2012 marks the centenary of its establishment. More remarkably, the guiding hand behind the school was a Swedish vet, Konard Hill, DVM.

In the opening years of the 20th Century, Persia (as it was then) had immense resources, a large agricultural base and extensive animal husbandry. However, there were no organised Veterinary Services and essentially no veterinary care. The country was ruled by the Shah but there were many other rivals and powerful families who also laid claim to power, authority and wealth in the region. The government was frequently in disorder and not known for its efficiency.

At that time, the two principal powers in the region were Imperial Russia and Britain, which controlled India, including what is now modern Pakistan. Both Britain and Russia were interested in establishing an efficient and professional veterinary and health care system, and both sought help from different quarters. Italy and Austria were approached, but with little success. Lastly, the
choice fell on Sweden, a small and rather distant country. Konard Hill was a military official with the Royal Swedish Hussars and came originally from Småland, an area in the south of Sweden, full of luxuriant forests and plenty of lakes. In 1912, Hill signed a three-year contract with the Government of Persia to set up a veterinary care system in this country. He was also charged with ‘performing other responsibilities for which he was suited’. During this period, and assisted by a farrier, Konard Hill trained 200 local people to shoe horses.

Hill then decided to establish a veterinary school in Iran. The length of the course was to be two years and only eight students were accepted in the first intake. In collaboration with Abutalib Khan, a general practitioner who had studied medicine in Austria and worked in Tehran, Hill began training students in the practice and theory of veterinary medicine. Khan helped Hill in compiling and translating veterinary and scientific terms. This photograph shows the graduation ceremony of the first eight students, accompanied by Konard Hill and Abutalib Khan.

As it was not possible for an army officer to serve two countries at the same time, Hill had been forced to resign his commission in the Swedish military. However, since he assumed his duties in his new country with great passion, he was soon promoted to the rank of Major in the Persian Gendarmerie. Just one year after his arrival, Konard Hill had already managed to establish a veterinary hospital for the horses, mules and camels of the Gendarmerie and Army. While the hospital was modest, it was very modern and standards-based. Later, Hill was further promoted to Colonel.

One specific problem that Konard Hill encountered was the large number of stray dogs in the suburbs and city centre of Tehran. The dogs spread various diseases, including cutaneous leishmaniosis, which is the most common form of leishmaniosis. This infection usually produces ulcers on the exposed parts of the body, such as the face, arms and legs. There may be a large number of lesions which can cause serious disability and, when the ulcers heal, they leave permanent scars. Fortunately the disease has now been eradicated.

In the summer of 1914, Hill was posted to the city of Bouroujerd,
which had been overrun by bandits and brigands. There, he also won fame as a very able soldier. Since the Gendarmerie had no doctor at this post, Hill was forced to perform that duty as well, and helped tend the wounded from the fighting.

Konard Hill thus earned a reputation as a man of duty and of action, and was richly decorated by his adopted country with medals and commendations. On the completion of his mission in Persia, he was awarded the highly prestigious Gold Medal for Valour in Combat, becoming one of the rare Swedes to receive that decoration.

With all these accomplishments, it is scarcely surprising that the National Committee of Vet2011 and the National Committee of IBC (International Bourgelat Committee) in Iran decided to organise an event to commemorate World Veterinary Day that also celebrated the life of Konard Hill, DVM. They enlisted the assistance of Mr Karl Leifland, Minister Counsellor of the Swedish Embassy in Tehran, the Iranian Veterinary Association and UNESCO. The aim was to create a project that would work towards achieving the principal goal of the IBC: the inventory and preservation of the tangible and intangible scientific and cultural heritage of veterinary medicine and its promotion to the widest possible public. This valuable heritage includes the following:

– the creation of veterinary education, the veterinary profession, veterinary science and ethics, and the invention of the concept of comparative biopathology by Claude Bourgelat at the end of the 18th Century
– all the many veterinary scientific contributions to animal and human health and welfare
– the founding concepts and fundamental values enshrined in the veterinary profession
– recognition of veterinarians as benefactors of humanity and particular acknowledgement of those veterinarians renowned for their outstanding achievements in many different spheres
– all veterinary schools and faculties, along with their libraries, museums and historic collections
– all the veterinary associations and other institutions that have been active for more than 50 years, and especially the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), created in 1924.

This event gave participants the opportunity to create a platform for dialogue between Iran and Sweden, and to further their collaboration in the field of veterinary science. Among the keynote speakers were Mr Karl Leifland, Minister Counsellor of the Swedish Embassy in Tehran; Mr Noroozian of the Iranian Veterinary Association and Mr Hamidreza Mahmoudi, Head of the National Committee of Vet2011 and the IBC in Iran. The speakers emphasised the importance of antimicrobial resistance (the theme of World Veterinary Day 2012), as well as describing the contribution of Swedish vet, Konard Hill, founder of the first veterinary school in Iran.

It took place on the last night of the 17th Iranian Veterinary Congress, which was held from 28 to 30 April in the International Razi Hall. Earlier, during the opening ceremony of the Congress, Mr Karl Leifland spoke about the life and achievements of the Swedish vet from Småland who played such an important role in the development of Iran’s veterinary education system.