Veterinary ethics in the liberalised market: the Zambian environment

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Summary
The Zambian veterinary delivery system is responding to changes in the socio-economic environment and in the structural organisation and functions of the delivery system itself. Privatisation and liberalisation are now being actively pursued as official Government policy with free competition being encouraged. As a profession, veterinarians must safeguard their interests by, among other actions, self-regulating their activities so as to enhance their standing in society and to develop or maintain standards worthy of the profession. This will be achieved largely through the Veterinary Association of Zambia. It is also imperative for the Government to ensure that governmental policy succeeds by providing an appropriate environment and by protecting the public and animals from undesirable actions by agents of the delivery system (veterinarians and para-professionals). There is also the need to maintain harmony among these agents and to resolve any differences which develop between colleagues and subordinates.

Such objectives call for laws and codes of ethics appropriate to the environment of Zambia to be established to guide practitioners, the Veterinary Association, the public and any statutory body which is established to enforce these laws and codes of conduct.

The authors explore the meanings of ethics and laws, the principles which will guide stakeholders to develop such ethics and the roles of veterinary associations, statutory bodies, e.g. Veterinary Boards or Councils, veterinary schools and other stakeholders, such as para-professionals, including auxiliaries. The authors also examine the implications of certain rules, such as free competition in service delivery. The establishment of regulations and quality control methods are discussed briefly.

Keywords

Ethics, delivery and professionalism

Ethics
Ethics may be defined as 'a system of moral principles which may be drawn into rules of conduct recognised in respect to a particular group such as the veterinary profession' (11). In ethics, values relating to human conduct are examined with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions. Veterinary ethics therefore means ethics in relation to veterinary professionals and para-professionals, including auxiliaries, directly involved in the provision of animal health care services (12).
Delivery systems
An animal health care delivery system describes the way in which knowledge, skills and other resources related to animal health are organised within an economy for the delivery of services to animal production systems and their associated food/marketing chains (7).

Among the services offered are curative, preventative and public health services. In addition, there are promotional services, regulatory activities and facilitatory services. These services consume scant resources which could have been used elsewhere. Such services are paid for by the client or the State or by some combination of the two. The services are either publicly or privately provided. Services are provided by veterinarians (professionals) and para-professionals (e.g., veterinary assistants).

Are ethics necessary in veterinary delivery systems?
Currently in Zambia there is an active policy of privatising and liberalising veterinary delivery sub-systems, with support coming mainly from the European Union and Member States and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (9).

Those in private practice live on income earned in exchange for their services, and therefore the quality of these services is definitely a factor which determines whether these practitioners continue to operate. Privatisation and liberalisation require that the market for private services be competitive, with free entry and exit of qualified agents who can be registered. This is likely to create tensions among professionals, and between professionals and para-professionals, especially as the production systems in Zambia and in other sub-Saharan African countries may be able to support only a handful of private professional practitioners. It will, therefore, be in the interests of the profession to protect veterinarians against an unfavourable environment, to ensure the development and maintenance of high standards and to promote cohesiveness among members. One way to achieve this is by creating a code of conduct – an institutional arrangement – to define how the agents of the delivery system should co-operate and/or compete. Such an arrangement could provide a mechanism by which changes in the law could be achieved.

Delivery systems may be considered to be composed of agents and principals (4, 6). An agency relationship occurs when an individual, the principal, delegates authority to another individual, the agent, to take actions on his or her behalf. Examples are as follows: delegation of authority from a client to a veterinarian, from a veterinarian to a para-professional or from a veterinarian to another veterinarian. Another example is that of a contract between a public service authority and a principal, either intentionally or due to some other shortcoming, such as incompetence. This violation of contract by agents is generally known as moral hazard. Note that even where there is no explicit agreement, an implicit understanding may be violated (6).

Moral hazard arises because of market failure and, in anticipation of this, society tries to resolve the problem by creating non-market social institutions, such as an enforceable code of conduct. A code of ethics may therefore be instituted to protect the public and animals.

The profession
The veterinary profession in any economy is made up of properly qualified individuals as prescribed by law. Such individuals must be licensed or registered in order to practise. The veterinary profession must have the attributes of a profession, which are listed as follows (D.K. Leonard, personal communication, 1991):
- the job is technically based, and is founded on systematic knowledge or doctrine acquired only through long prescribed training
- the professional adheres to a set of professional norms. These involve collectivity or service orientation
- professionals depend upon their professional peers for at least a part of their approval and advancement. This attribute implies some degree of autonomy for the profession, enabling the profession to pass judgement on the technical quality and ethicality of the work of the professional.

The veterinarian in his or her working environment must interact with colleagues and para-professionals, who play an important role in Veterinary services in sub-Saharan Africa. Veterinarians also interact with clients.

Categorising veterinary ethics
Tannenbaum classifies veterinary ethics into four main categories (12), which are summarised as follows.

Descriptive ethics
Descriptive ethics denote those aspects of professional behaviour and attitudes which members of the profession actually consider to be right or wrong.

Official ethics
Official ethics are the official ethical standards which are formally adopted by organisations composed of professionals, such as the Veterinary Association of Zambia, and which are then imposed upon their members. The harshest penalty for a violator is expulsion from the organisation. Among the important functions of official veterinary ethics are the promotion and protection of the profession.

Administrative ethics
Administrative ethics are ethics administered by the Government bodies which regulate veterinary practice and the various activities in which veterinarians and animal health para-professionals engage. The violation of administrative...
standards may result in prosecution (with civil or criminal penalties), suspension from practice or deregistration.

Normative ethics
Normative ethics describe the search for ‘correct’ norms of professional veterinary behaviour and attitudes.

This classification has a number of implications. For example, it is possible for personal values to differ from official or administrative ethics. Moreover, official ethics may differ from normative ethics. In addition, official ethics may be adopted to become administrative ethics and thus become law.

Law and ethics

Law may be defined as the rules of conduct of an organised society, enforced by threat of punishment (2). The code of conduct or some aspects of this code, when incorporated into the rule of law, allow statutory bodies to use their substantial influence to force people to comply with the standards set, and can subject such people to some punishment or deprivation if they do not (12). The public, courts and/or statutory bodies may sue, prosecute or discipline practitioners by appealing to veterinary ethics (official or administrative).

The law also influences veterinary ethics by affecting decisions about how veterinarians ought to act in given circumstances (12). As practitioners, veterinarians should not ignore the law, even where they think that the law is morally wrong. In such cases, veterinarians may lobby the authorities, as a profession, to change the law by expressing a view on such a matter.

The role of statutory bodies

Aising from the concepts of moral hazard and information asymmetry (in this case, the agent has more information on how to deal with the problem than the principal, who may be a lay person), the public must be protected by the establishment of statutory bodies. There are two types of statutory bodies: Veterinary Councils and Veterinary Boards. The primary function of State boards or their equivalent is the protection of the public and of animals. For example, the veterinary act which established the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in the United Kingdom was intended to protect the interests of the public and of animals (1). The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (5) recommends that each country should have a statutory independent body for the following reasons:

- to establish standards for registration, to register ‘qualified’ veterinarians and to maintain a register of veterinarians
- to prepare ethical guidelines for the profession
- to enforce professional and ethical conduct.

This being so, the interests of the board may differ from those of the association or profession. The association may therefore have to lobby to influence laws covering the activities of association members.

The role of the veterinary associations

As official ethics are established by the profession, only those members or groups affiliated to the association will be bound by official ethics. Given that one of the main objectives of an association is to protect the profession and to enhance cohesiveness among members, i.e., collegiality, then the profession must develop its own code of conduct, ensure as wide a participation in such an exercise as possible and make this code available to new members. There will be a need to review the code regularly in the light of new knowledge or of a changing environment, as in the case of privatisation in Zambia.

It is the further role of the association to lobby for particular items in the code of conduct to be included in appropriate legislation. Veterinary associations, in conjunction with schools, can play a part in educating veterinary students on the principles of ethics and on official ethics. Moreover, the association must express its stand on ethical issues to the public and play an educational role.

The role of training institutes

Students are introduced to veterinary practice in their pre-clinical and clinical years by working with their lecturers on clinical materials and in field practicals. During these contacts, ethical issues do arise and it is important that these issues are noted and their implications in regard to the existing code of conduct discussed. In this way students see ethics in action.

Veterinary schools should also be encouraged to have courses in ethics, or ethics should be included in courses such as Jurisprudence or Veterinary Legislation. During these courses, the principles of ethics will probably be covered with an emphasis on normative ethics. Official and administrative codes of ethics will be introduced and copies of the relevant codes should be distributed, including any items which are incorporated into the Veterinary Medical Practice Act, such as the Veterinary Surgeons’ Act of Zambia.

In addition, schools may have their own codes of conduct for students. For example, although weekends are regarded as non-schooling days, some students may be expected to be on call during defined periods as a preparation for actual practice. Otherwise, students may think that veterinarians stop working at 5.00 pm on Friday and wait for Monday to resume work.

The role of para-professionals

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are a great number of para-professionals. They comprise many of the agents of the delivery system, normally performing their duties under the supervision of veterinarians.

‘A para-profession is a group that lacks autonomy, as their work is controlled by others outside the para-profession, specifically members of a profession, if one exists in their domain’ (D.K. Leonard, personal communication, 1991).
The question is whether para-professionals are necessary. Veterinary officers and assistants may be considered to be interchangeable in the provision of certain services. This is especially important given that a number of interventions can be performed by either veterinarians or para-professionals. In circumstances in which it is possible to substitute veterinary assistants for professionals, it makes economic sense to 'find' the right combination of the two, given that resources are scarce.

Where the delivery system and the economy cannot supply professionals, either due to resource constraints (not enough veterinarians) or market failure in a liberalised economy (private veterinarians not being available in some areas, especially in remote areas in which production systems or lifestyles are not attractive to private practitioners), then the Government must, if it is concerned with development and the welfare of traditional farmers, provide the service publicly, using a combination of professionals and para-professionals, with the latter substituting for the former.

Some private veterinarians may have to employ para-professionals. The economic explanation for this is that, like any other industry, the animal health industry employs the principle of comparative advantage. That is, given the opportunity cost of the time of the veterinarian, he or she can engage a para-professional (over whom the veterinarian has absolute advantage in performing most tasks), instead of employing another professional or doing the work himself or herself, and thus increase the efficiency of the practice. In addition, literature on privatisation indicates that para-professionals can be successful in private practice (8). Indeed, such an option is being seriously examined in Zambia (9).

**Veterinary ethics and para-professionals**

As veterinary assistants are not members of the Veterinary Association of Zambia, they cannot be regulated by official ethics. However, the Association can lobby for individual employers (practices or corporate bodies) and the Government or Veterinary Council/Board to have an enforceable code of conduct for the para-professionals. In Zambia, for example, the code may specify that, in order to practise, veterinary assistants must be registered by the Council/Board and be under the supervision of either a Government Veterinary Officer or a private practitioner.

It should further be noted that para-professionals employed by a practice or institution may bring their employer into disrepute. Therefore, it is in the interest of the supervising veterinarians to ensure that the para-professionals behave ethically.

**Government veterinarians and private practice**

This is an issue that needs to be addressed squarely. Ideally, Government officials should restrict themselves to the provision of public goods. The consumer of private goods receives the full benefit of such goods to the exclusion of other consumers. Rivalry occurs when consumers need the same service, as in the case of clinical service. However, the benefits of public goods cannot be denied to other consumers, e.g., benefits arising from the control of diseases such as rinderpest.

In regard to service delivery, public interest theory suggests that private goods should be privately delivered, unless there is a market failure, and public goods may be publicly or privately delivered, depending on the economics of delivery (Table I). For example, public goods may be delivered privately, if a private practitioner is contracted to supply such a service.

**Table I**

**Public interest theory and the delivery of public and private goods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider of goods</th>
<th>Nature of provision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private provider</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public provider</td>
<td>May be provided when there is a market failure</td>
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If there are no market failures, those in the public service should not be allowed to practise as, being already in employment, they will have an unfair advantage over private practitioners, unless there are mechanisms to discount this.

**What is meant by unfair advantage?**

The purpose of privatisation is to increase the efficiency of the veterinary delivery system and to improve access to this system by consumers (producers). This may be achieved through fair competition with free entry and exit of suppliers into the service market. Those in employment receive a salary, are probably housed and may have access to official transport. Their participation in private practice means that the employer is subsidising such participation, which constitutes unfair practice. With regard to the issue of salary, the question which must be addressed is whether those in official employment are receiving an adequate salary. If not, private practice may constitute a form of raising their salaries to economic levels.

It has been suggested by some that, as long as the Government charges economic prices for services rendered, the public provision of services may exist side by side with that of the private sector. The problem with this proposition is that it does not take into account the economies of scale that exist in the public sector. This is another example of unfair practice.

However, there are instances, as mentioned above, of market failures. Where these occur, the private sector may not be in a position to supply the private goods. In such a situation, the Government official (veterinarian or veterinary assistant) may...
be allowed to provide both public and private goods to the producers, as long as this does not conflict with the official duties of the officer.

**Should entry to a given market be restricted?**

At the professional level, it is likely that the market for, or the effective demand for, private veterinary services, including medicines, may only be able to support two or so self-employed veterinary practitioners with their employees or partners. This is likely to result in calls to restrict entry into the market. This is contrary to the general concept of privatisation, in which free competition is advocated as long as such competition is fair. Where pure economic profit can be obtained, and the market is competitive, more providers (fixed resources) will be attracted into this market, eventually eliminating the economic profit. If economic losses come into play, the exit of firms from the market will eliminate the loss.

Codes of conduct should address fair entry. Individuals should be free to enter and exit from such markets and this should be part of the official code.

**Establishment of regulations and quality control for veterinary activities**

The provision of high-quality veterinary services is essential. This is especially the case in a liberalised environment. To ensure that quality services are provided, the following items are necessary:

- the provision of appropriate regulations (laws and ethics)
- the establishment of quality control (QC) mechanisms beyond those enshrined in these laws and ethics. QC is a process whereby health providers continuously strive to meet customer and professional expectations. The QC model relevant to developing countries is the quality assurance (QA) approach. In this approach, actual performance is measured against written standards and service objectives (10).

Regulations in the form of laws are established through the legislative process. Major stakeholders should be involved in this exercise. The principal group of laws will be those regulating veterinary practice agents and those specifying actions to be taken in the case of specific disease threats. As stated above, some aspects of QC are enshrined in these laws.

Central to the QC model is the transformation of input structures (physical, human, funding and organisational) into outcomes. The transformation is achieved by applying systems processes. Processes are the specific activities conducted by the agents of the system, e.g., vaccination campaigns. The desired outcomes in veterinary medicine are as follows:

- improving animal health and productivity
- protecting public health.

In QC work, one measures inputs (whether they are available in the right combination) and examines whether the processes employed give the desired outcomes. If not, why not? Questions which must be asked include: is there room for improvement? What is the effect of proposed measures on effectiveness, efficiency and equity? Are the services acceptable to the customers?

In instituting QA mechanisms, the following methods and units of analysis may be used (3).

**Practitioner performance**

This can be evaluated by a staff review committee, which should assess the technical performance of the practitioner, and interpersonal relations between the practitioner and clients. This method is suitable in a setting with more than one professional.

**Health-care setting**

The clinic, veterinary practice, veterinary centre or facility is important. Accreditation of such a facility takes place when this facility meets the basic standards set either by law or by the accrediting body. The basic standards may include the availability of inputs (e.g., qualified staff), basic processes at the facility (e.g., the existence of a recording system, preferably a management information system) and outcomes.

**Programmes and target groups**

Programmes such as immunisation are often conducted in specified target groups. Changes in health status demonstrated by selected indicators (such as the incidence or prevalence of appropriately selected diseases or disease events) are used to assess the effectiveness of care. This is the so-called tracer method.

Consumer satisfaction surveys give feedback from the clients. Such surveys can be instituted by health-care units and for specific programmes. They are additional to the other methods of QC. It is also important to develop a culture of law and order, accountability and transparency, at the same time as the establishment of specific QC projects. Regulations should be enforced by veterinary agents, the police and the judiciary. A strong professional association can make a positive contribution to such an undertaking.

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