

The Future of the Association of Avian Veterinarians in Australia

Patricia Macwhirter¹

Links with the Association of Avian Veterinarians have served our organisation well in terms of access to scientific literature and links with the global avian veterinary community and should be continued. However, a number of local issues have arisen that need to be addressed. These include rising insurance claims in avian related cases; the need to encourage Specialist Registration amongst Australian avian veterinarians; the need to promote local avian medicine education and research; the need to market avian services effectively to non-avian veterinarians as well as the pet owning public and the desirability of developing stronger links with veterinarians working with birds in the Pacific Basin Region. Computer technology, particularly the use of the Internet, offers interesting scope for international collaborative studies and educational opportunities. Forward planning to address or capitalise on these issues needs to be undertaken by our group.

Organisation of Australian veterinarians involved in Avian Medicine (as distinct from Poultry Medicine) dated from the Sydney University Post Graduate Foundation Course in Avian Medicine in 1981. Prior to this time there were a number of veterinarians who had been working with birds, particularly Drs Tom Hungerford, Michael Raises, Ross Perry, Harry Cooper, David Schultz, David Madill, Doug Black, Garry Cross and Pin Needham but there was no formal group. Following the 1981 course, Garry Cross organised a weekend seminar at Glenfield, N.S.W. and it was from this 1982 gathering that our group became formalised, initially as a special interest group within the Australian Veterinary Poultry Association (AVPA). It was also at the 1982 meeting that the multi-author book Everybird, a Guide to Bird Health was initiated which was designed for aviculturists and has since gone through two print runs, sold nearly 10,000 copies and royalties from which have funded research into megabacteria, psittacine haematology, penguin parasites and causes of disease in nestling galahs.

Many of the issues that faced those of us working in Avian Medicine in the 1980s are still current today and relevant to our future. These include

- N how we align ourselves with other veterinary organisations;
- N how to improve, monitor and recognise competence in avian medicine;
- N how to foster avian research;
- N how to promote our services to bird owners and other veterinarians;
- N our position regarding avian importation and exportation, bird smuggling, welfare and conservation involvement generally.

¹

Highbury Veterinary Clinic, 128 Highbury Road, Burwood, VIC, 3125

In recent times insurance claims in avian practice have become a significant issue, with claims for ratites and expensive psittacines becoming causes for concern for Australian Veterinary Association Insurance Claims committee and pointing to the need for more effective risk management by veterinarians working with birds. Opportunities opened by the Internet for international co-operation, educational links and collaborative studies are also important for our future.

Alignment with other Professional Organisations

Lack of a critical mass of members to justify publication of our own scientific journal and the need to access overseas scientific literature to stay current with developments in the field has always been a difficulty for our group. Because of this we have had to align with other organisations. Initially we were part of the Australian Veterinary Poultry Association (AVPA) but it was clear that our interests and expectations were different and eventually it was mutually agreed that separate organisations would better serve our respective needs. Not all of our members are members of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) and alignment with the AVA has not, to date, received membership backing.

In 1985 our group (at that stage still part of the AVPA) held its first international conference in conjunction with that year's Avicultural Convention in Melbourne. Dr Greg Harrison from Florida and Mr George Smith from the U.K were our key speakers and the possibility of our group linking with The Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) was discussed. The AAV was formed in North America a little earlier than our Australian group and from the early 1980s a number of Australians, as well as other international members, joined. In 1987 the AAV held a conference in Hawaii and over a dozen Australians attending. I can't quite recall all of the scientific papers but visions of Drs Madill and Cannon as wombats, Dr Tribe as an emu, Dr Perry as a kangaroo and Harry Cooper as Crocodile Dundee, not to mention the rest of us, in Dr Needham's Aussie animal sketch at the luau are indelibly imprinted in my mind. In 1989 I attended the AAV Conference in Seattle, Washington having been given the task of further exploring the possibility of our group becoming a branch of the AAV. The outcome of this was the formation of the Australian Committee of the AAV of which I was elected the first President in 1990, followed in subsequent years by Drs Gill, Cannon, Perry, Doneley, Vogelnest, Filippich and from this meeting David Madill. Dr Cross has always been our Secretary/treasurer.

In some respects our alignment with AAV has served us well in that it gives us access to a dynamic group that runs excellent conferences and publishes excellent scientific material. In other respects it doesn't work so well. The AAV is an American organisation with international members and the tyranny of distance means that very few of our members are able to regularly attend the North American conferences or take part in other aspects of the organisation. Even though the AAV parent body has taken a benevolent, hands off, approach to the Australian committee, the fundamental North American base with ourselves as junior partners has been an issue. The insurance claims issue (see below), the desirability of representation on Australian government bodies and of having stronger links with other members of the profession for promotional reasons have emerged as issues where it might be beneficial for us to closer establish links with the Australian Veterinary Association. We need to revisit the possibility of becoming a special interest group of the AVA while at the same time allowing members to continue with AAV membership as well as retaining our own individual identity.

Insurance Claims

I currently serve on the AVA/Guild Insurance Claims Committee, a committee that was originally formed to mitigate claims being made against veterinarians by improving our collective risk management. Whereas in past years equine cases always featured prominently amongst claims being processed, this year and last year avian cases have come to the fore. Several of these cases are still running and it is inappropriate to discuss details but a typical problem has been with veterinarians who are inexperienced in ratite medicine giving health certificates to individuals selling ostriches and birds being found to be defective post purchase. This potentially leaves the veterinarian who issued the certificate liable for the mistake as well as disadvantaging everyone else who pays into the insurance pool by forcing up premiums. Sums of money involved can be considerable, particularly compared with small animal claims.

The AVA Insurance Claims Committee has asked our avian group to consider becoming a special interest group within the AVA with a view to improving competence and risk management in avian medicine in the profession generally, particularly with respect to ratite medicine. While it would be expected that ratite claims will fall in the current climate of tumbling ostrich prices, it is still in our collective interest to work pro actively with the Insurance Claims Committee regarding techniques to adopt to improve risk management in avian health care generally. For example taking care in the design of health examination certificates, only carrying out health checks and issuing certificates on behalf of purchasers rather than sellers, and alerting inexperienced practitioners to their risk exposure when dealing with expensive birds when they have minimal experience or training with the species. It is important to note that it is just as often non - AAV members that are involved in avian insurance claims, but that we all suffer whenever a claim occurs because of the upward pressure this places on insurance premiums. The challenge is to improve the competence of the profession generally in avian medicine or to dissuade those not performing up to standard and who are not willing to take steps to improve their competence, to desist from working with birds.

While it is still too early to assess the long term outcome, it appears that the introduction of de facto contingency fees for solicitors in New South Wales may be resulting in increased litigation in relation to veterinary claims, including avian claims. The Insurance Claims Committee is monitoring this situation closely and recommending vigorous defence of cases where there does not appear to be evidence of malpractice. The outcome of current cases will be relevant to our group.

Avian Specialist Registration

Specialist Registration in Avian Medicine has been, and continues to be, a source of concern. There needs to be a competently conducted, ethical, specialist accreditation process that is tough but fair and has credibility both in Australia and with the international avian veterinary community. Candidates need to have confidence in the system because preparation for Specialist Registration is costly both in terms of time and money. Australian candidates pay more than double the fees that U.S. candidates pay to sit Specialist Accreditation examinations and the cost of sitting the examination is only a fraction of the cost involved in taking time away from practice to undertake an approved training program and to prepare for the exams.

Cage and Aviary Birds were initially designated as a discipline distinct from Poultry within the Avian Medicine Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in the 1980s. While ACVSc Membership examinations in Poultry and general Avian Medicine have attracted many

candidates and seem to have run smoothly, the same cannot be said for Fellowship examinations, on which Specialist Registration is based. To date three Fellowship examinations have been held for non-poultry candidates, all of which have attracted controversy. There have been no Fellowship examinations conducted in Avian Medicine since 1992 and, at the time of writing (July 1996), no candidate has enrolled in an ACVSc approved Avian Medicine Fellowship Training Program since 1989.

The issues then, and now, are the need to ensure that training programs and guidelines are of an appropriate international standard and that examinations correspond to guidelines assigned; the need for transparency of decision making processes and for candidates to have right of independent review to be conducted by individuals with competence in the discipline.

A concerted effort is needed to deal with the political as well as the technical side of this issue and it will be necessary to work both with the ACVSc and with the Advisory Committee on the Registration of Veterinary Specialists to resolve the problem. The Australian Committee of the AAV has placed priority on expediting this process as the lack of a credible and functional specialist training and accreditation system has held back avian veterinarians from achieving their professional potential in this country compared with progress being made elsewhere in the world. Hopefully there will be positive outcomes to report by the time of the Conference.

Policies regarding avian importation, exportation, welfare and conservation issues

The AAV Australian Committee has made considerable progress in gaining recognition as a credible source of scientific information regarding Avian Medicine and has been invited to participate in the drafting of policy regarding avian importation. Views in our organisation are not uniform on a number of controversial issues, such as importation, and a genuine effort has been made to separate scientific from political opinion in the representations made. This process should be ongoing both with the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service and with other government departments, where matters are relevant to the interests of our members. Forming a special interest group within the AAV could aid this process as the AAV is the organisation government bodies tend to initially contact with policy concerns where a rapid response is required.

Most avian veterinarians are involved in some aspect of conservation or wild bird rehabilitation. Many avian veterinarians, myself included, find the discipline attractive because it is not driven solely by the companion animal bond, as is generally the case in dog and cat practice, but also has links with wild birds and the preservation of biodiversity and wildlife habitats. The AAV's slogan 'Advancing and promoting avian medicine and stewardship' suggests that this perception is widespread in the organisation and our global links provide opportunities to join with other workers internationally to help to achieve both Avian Medicine and stewardship goals. There would seem to be opportunities which we have not yet pursued to work with veterinarians in developing countries in the Pacific Basin to improve the delivery of avian medicine for both wild and captive birds. Perhaps we could organise an off-shore avian medicine conference in South East Asia inviting participation of local veterinarians.

Australia offers delightful opportunities for overseas veterinarians to observe our native birds in natural settings. We need to capitalise on this interest, perhaps encouraging a professional naturalist/ecotourism operator to operate satellite tours in association with our annual conferences and to promote these overseas. Our conferences need to be organised further in advance and there needs to be a Conference Coordinator appointed separate from our normal

executive to spread the work load and ensure success.

Education and Research

Worldwide Avian Medicine has been a practice (as opposed to university) initiated and driven discipline developed in response to a market place need for expertise in pet bird medicine. Academic institutions have only become involved subsequently. Sydney University under Garry Cross and Queensland University under Lucio Filippich now have strong avian medicine sections with significant research being done with psittacine viruses, chlamydia and megabacteria. Sydney University is currently developing an external Masters degree program in avian medicine. Murdoch University brings in external lecturers and offers a sound elective and basic bird medicine program to students. The Avian Medicine program at Melbourne University is weaker in terms of program structure and allocated teaching time than is the case at the other Australian Veterinary Schools.

Controversy over the Avian Medicine Fellowship training and examination process has meant that this avenue of encouraging research and professional excellence has not operated for the past four years. The ACVSc system generally works well in encouraging professional achievement in individuals working from practice, so it is unfortunate that administrative concerns have hampered effective implementation. AVCS Membership training and examinations have been well supported.

Use of the Internet has opened up an exciting new range of possibilities for international educational programs and collaborative studies and literature review from either practice or academic settings. Commonality or considerable overlap in guidelines for Specialist Registration between Australia and North America would help in developing collaborative teaching modules or programs. There are avian sections for both the Veterinary Information Network (VIN) and Noah (United States based Internet bulletin boards) which allow global information exchange between veterinarians interested in birds. While it is possible for Australians to link in with these systems it is more complicated and costly than is the case for North American veterinarians. It is, however, simple to link up with overseas veterinarians via Email and with improved technology and the work being done by the AVA it is expected that there will be much simpler and economical connections available for Australian veterinarians to link in with the international avian veterinary community in the near future.

A collaborative project is currently underway working via the Internet with avian veterinarians in Europe, North America and Australia trying to characterise self mutilation syndromes in psittacines and develop effective diagnostic and treatment protocols. Avian veterinarians at this conference will be invited to take part in this study.

Promoting our Services

Avian veterinarians need to market their services both to the general public and to other veterinarians. Linking with the AVA would give us stronger ties with the profession and could help us in marketing our services to other veterinarians, for example via participation in AVA Conferences, as well as helping us to market to the pet owning public, for example by participation in Pet Expos etc. Avicultural and ratite clients form a special group that can be reached via specialist publications or attendance at their conferences. In order to capitalise on these opportunities we need to be prepared with suitable educational and promotional material.

Overseas avian veterinary practices are frequently linked with other exotic species. For a variety of local reasons this trend has not emerged as strongly in Australia as overseas but it may well be a pattern that develops in the future.

Delivering outcomes

It's one thing to have ideas, it's another to translate these into outcomes. Our organisation should be able to deliver significant achievements in terms of encouraging excellence in avian patient care and reducing exposure to insurance claims. We should aim to encourage avian veterinarians to achieve their professional potential by fostering education, research and specialist recognition. We should encourage avian stewardship by co-operating with others working with bird and habitat conservation in Australia and the Pacific Basin and by taking part in decision making processes relating to avian issues. We need to think laterally and develop innovative management structures and processes to identify the needs and interests of our members and to generate a resourceful business plan to accomplish these objectives.