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Hold your horses

Alberta animal owners are bucking a proposed law that would make it illegal to get alternative therapies for their livestock

Marnie Ko - April 24, 2006

Joe Goetz puts in long hours, raising a hundred quarter horses on his land, 18 miles northwest of Rimbey, Alta. At the end of a hard day, he often gets a massage for his strained muscles. "When my back gets sore, I don't go to the doctor; I go to the massage therapist," he says. As it turns out, so do his horses. "When a horse has trauma up in the shoulders or withers, or takes a fall, drugs don't work." A nice horse massage, he's convinced, does the trick.

For humans, alternative therapies (massage, chiropractic and prayer are the three most common according to surveys) are bigger than ever--used these days by about 75 per cent of Canadians. But they're not just for humans. Animal owners have been turning to alternative treatments in growing numbers, too. However, that may be about to end. If proposed amendments to the Alberta Veterinary Profession Act are passed later this year, you can forget about hiring Queen Elizabeth's horse whisperer, Monty Roberts, or Oprah's dog psychologist, Cesar Millan. Getting anyone other than a licensed and registered veterinarian to give your beagle a backrub will be illegal. Not surprisingly, the move is causing plenty of tension among animal owners across the province, who claim that veterinarians are attempting to crowd out any competition, restrict trade, and take away consumer choice. "I'm not against vets, but they are trying to take away my choices," says Goetz. "My vet should not be able to tell me what I can do with my horses. This is a power play about control and making more money."

In Alberta, the province's Veterinary Profession Act, administered by Alberta Human Resources and Employment, specifically defines veterinary medicine as "a medical service," including surgery, obstetrics and ova and embryo collection, and prescribing and selling drugs. The new proposal by the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association would take that several steps further. The plan is to redefine veterinary medicine as maintaining the health of animals, preventing, diagnosing and healing diseases and injuries, and "examining, diagnosing, prescribing, manipulating and treating for the prevention, alleviation or correction of a disease, injury, condition, deformity, defect or lesion of an animal," with or without the use of drugs. Animal dentistry by a trained layperson would be specifically outlawed, as would the dispensation of any nutritional and herbal treatments. Lynn Gustafson, a goat and sheep farmer near Three Hills, Alta., is astonished that it's perfectly legal for him to take his kids to any alternative health practitioner--with no doctor referral--but not so with his animals. For humans, he points out, "massage therapy isn't even considered medical treatment."

When it comes to money, there's no question that veterinarians have been feeling a pinch in recent years. The Ottawa-based Canadian Veterinary Medical Association estimates a first year vet will earn an initial annual income of between \$40,000 and \$60,000. Last year's biennial American Veterinary Medical Association Economic Report on Veterinarians and Veterinary Practices concluded that veterinarians' income experienced little real growth from 1985 to 1995--more proof, argued the report, of a disturbing, 20-year downward economic trend. The National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues, formed in 2000 as a joint venture between Canadian and American veterinary associations to increase the income base of vets, even had the catchy campaign slogan, "Higher profits mean healthier patients."

Tapping into the burgeoning domain of alternative health treatments may be a creative solution for vet income stagnation, especially when vets traditionally have been inclined to suggest euthanasia in difficult-to-treat cases. As one 1999 study of vet income growth pointed out, "obviously, euthanasia eliminates any potential for future income from that particular patient."

The proposed amendments include exemptions that are clearly aimed at appeasing some Alberta animal owners by allowing routine husbandry practices (owner treatment of animals, including castration, dehorning, and access to production animal drugs), as well as farriers' tasks, which can be performed by non-veterinarians. However, Laurie Edge-Hughes, a physical therapist treating animals, says the proposed definition is still too broad. "It will eliminate any choices outside traditional vet medicine," she says. "Alternative practitioners would not be able to practise without direct supervision and approval by vets."

The changes are of concern to horse breeders in particular, because so many equine competitions ban drug therapies, requiring owners to search for natural alternatives. Equine dentists--who have mastered the trade of horse dentistry through apprenticeship, practical work, and courses--are also headed for a confrontation with the law.

The battle between vets and non-licensed animal therapists began in 2002, when the vet association tried and failed to get an injunction against Louis Pequin, a Sunset House, Alta., master blacksmith with a certificate in equine dentistry. The Alberta Veterinary Medical Association accused Pequin, who has spent years examining and filing horses' teeth, of practising veterinary medicine without a licence. Both the Court of Queen's Bench and then the Court of Appeal ruled Pequin's dentistry did not fall under the definition of veterinary medicine. The AVMA's push to have the Supreme Court of Canada hear the case was turned down.

In her September 2002 ruling, Alberta Court of Queen's Bench Justice Myra Bielby scolded the veterinary association for publishing literature in 1994 that claimed dentistry was part of veterinary medicine. The AVMA had "no authority to grant itself a wider jurisdiction than that accorded by the provincial legislature," Bielby ruled, adding that "self-serving publications" did not advance their cause. The act did not afford veterinarians "the exclusive right to practice equine dentistry either expressly," or as a result of "overriding concern for public safety."

It seems certain that precedents in human medicine played a role in influencing the court's decision. Canadian podiatrists and chiropractors, for example, needn't be medical doctors to practise on humans. Likewise, most acupuncturists and herbalists also practise free of any statutory requirement to be a medical school graduate. "How can there possibly be a higher standard for animals and vets than for human medicine?" wonders Gustafson.

Duane Landals, the AVMA registrar, admits the push for the new legislation--which was originally scheduled to be tabled in Alberta's legislature this spring, probably by Human Resources and Employment Minister Mike Cardinal, but has been delayed pending public consultation, due to public outcry--is a direct response to the court's decision. He says animal owners must be protected from those who make medically unproven claims--such as "laypeople claiming correcting dentistry affects a horse's gait." He insists the legislation will change little in practice, but admits that alternative health practitioners will find themselves working outside the law. "There is no such thing as an animal physiotherapist, because Alberta law doesn't expressly allow physiotherapists to work on animals," says Landals. But ask him about acupuncture, or common farmer practices, such as delivering calves or pulling teeth, and Landals is unequivocal: "There is no question," he says, that these things are veterinary medicine.

Goetz argues that breeders like him have been doing fine for generations without the protection of the veterinary profession. "Vets don't have all the answers," he says. "Farmers aren't stupid. We aren't going to endanger the lives of stock worth thousands of dollars." It's little wonder, then, that livestock owners see the veterinarians' motives as less than pure. Kam MacGregor, who raises 60 quarter horses near Pigeon Lake, Alta., and holds a horse sports therapist certificate from the B.C. College of Equine Therapy, doesn't believe the issue is one of protection at all. "Vets are using bully tactics. It's all about power, arrogance and, of course, money," he says. MacGregor says the new laws will spell an end to the traditional rural ways that have been part of western Canadian livestock husbandry since pioneer days. "Once they get this law changed," he says, only half joking, "it will be against the law for a priest to come and bless your horse without the supervision of a vet."