

The history and achievements of the South African Veterinary Association

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Dates:

Received: 01 Mar. 2013

Accepted: 09 Apr. 2013

Published: 17 Sept. 2013

How to cite this article:

Cameron, C.M., 2013, 'The history and achievements of the South African Veterinary Association', *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* 84(1), Art. #1034, 4 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/jsava.v84i1.1034>

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This article, which was originally designed as a power point presentation, focuses on the role and achievements of the South African Veterinary Association (SAVA). It is an organisation that has fostered functional cohesion not only within the profession, but also with the broader society in providing a socially and economically supportive animal care system. Some major factors that have enabled this achievement include: rational organisational structure of the SAVAs; support of the promulgation and implementation of appropriate legislation; pursuance of initial and continued high quality education by various means; effective communication with the public and government bodies; international involvement; continued development of a visionary future to endorse the principle of 'One World One Health'.

Introduction

There is a very old saying that says: 'He who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it' (George Santayana).

This adage should not be taken lightly and should prompt us to remember that where we are today is the consequence of the vision, but also the errors, of our predecessors.

The author was asked to present an article that recorded the history of the South African Veterinary Association (SAVA) at the World Veterinary Congress (WVC) in October 2011, Cape Town. The article was presented, but the author wishes to further accentuate three elements that focus more on the future, namely:

- the origin and organisational structures of the veterinary associations as they have evolved over the years
- education
- representation of the profession by the Association.

This article does not look in detail at the historical chronology of events, but rather focuses on the professional achievements over time and their consequences for the future. It is not what the profession has done, but what it has accomplished and where it is going that are important.

Origin and organisational structure of the South African Veterinary Association

Thanks to the endeavours of visionaries early in the history of the veterinary profession, educated and experienced animal caretakers were legally designated as 'veterinarians'; meaning that they were examined and then 'vetted' and given authority to treat animals, thereby distinguishing them from lay people who were not vetted. This professional distinction is still valid today and is becoming an escalating issue and problem for the profession because of overlapping responsibilities.

From a historical point of view, the profession has been blessed with a number of colleagues and other authors who have seen it as their responsibility and duty to record its intricate history in South Africa (Bath 1997; Gutsche 1979; Verwoerd & Bigalke 2008).

The success of any country, civil organisation, military or economic enterprise is dependent on its managerial structure, effective functioning and internal communication. These are the critical foundations of any productive organisation.

In an article pertaining to the development of the SAVAs from one of its three predecessors, the Transvaal Veterinary Medical Association inaugurated in 1903, Coubrough (1978) alluded to and highlighted some of the obstacles that impeded the development of the Association and the evolution of the profession, *inter alia*:

- Lack of legislation and protection of the status of the profession.
- Unclear distinction between 'stock inspectors' and 'veterinarians'.
- Conflicts regarding the name of the Association.
- Lack of understanding of the concept of disease prevention and eradication as opposed to mere treatment.
- Lack of experience and knowledge regarding the diversity and integration of epidemiology.
- Privatisation of the profession.
- The imperative establishment of the Faculty of Veterinary Science.
- The necessity for establishing specialised Groups and Branches in the Association in order to accommodate specialist requirements and geographical interests and realities.

Regarding the historic development of the SAVA, it is also pertinent to note that in an address at a gala dinner of the SAVA, associated with an Annual General Meeting, on 11 June 2005, Rudolph D. Bigalke pointed out that there was not absolute chronological synchronism in the number of formal meetings that were held, largely due to an anomaly in which the initial, more regular general meetings were confused with the annual general meetings held in later years (Bigalke 2005).

Over the years the SAVA has diversified in many respects in order to accommodate the diverse needs of its members. This was primarily accomplished by the establishment of specialised groups and regional branches. One of several successes has been the development of equine private practice (Marlow 2010; Southern 1997). These structures are all accommodated in a central organisation; the Federal Council of the SAVA. This body appoints committees, which each have to manage a particular portfolio, such as Marketing and Communications, Medicines, Animal Welfare, Editorial Committee and Policy Development.

This arrangement was radically changed in 2010 with the acceptance of the current Memorandum of Incorporation as a consequence of the current *Companies Act* (Act No 71 of 1971). It requires that all companies should be governed by a Board of Directors taking full responsibility for all functional and financial matters. The SAVA also has additional sub-structures that will be elaborated on below.

For the greatest part of its existence the SAVA never had a physical 'home' and always had to rely on the good auspices of other organisations or rent office accommodation. Then in 1979, the SAVA was the fortunate inheritor of a house in Brooklyn, Pretoria from the estate of Professor Willem O. Neitz (Bath 1997; Bigalke 2000). What a heritage!

The structure of the dwelling was not suitable as a facility to house offices and so the property was sold and another house was bought, which was better located. With some reconstruction it fulfilled all the needs of the Association at that time. However, as the membership increased, the facilities

became insufficient, so this building was demolished and rebuilt. It emulated the façade of the original Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute (OVI) head office at Onderstepoort, and is now the physical emblem and operational fulcrum of the SAVA's activities (Veary 2009). Ms Elize Nicolas (secretary) must be given major appreciation and recognition for her enthusiasm for and her dedication to the successful conclusion of this project.

The key functions of the South African Veterinary Association

Education

All other priorities aside, the major objective and responsibility of a professional association is to ensure that its members have continuous opportunities for education and to gain experience; without this, it will serve no purpose and collapse. The SAVA has excelled in this regard through three channels.

Presenting congresses

The present WVC is the ultimate example. In earlier times, the congresses were organised by the staff of the SAVA at national, regional (branch) and specialised levels. This was highly successful, but as the load and complexity increased, it became imperative to outsource the functions. This was successful but costly and it was soon realised that a significant income could be generated if the activity was done 'in house'.

Apart from being an educational service, it was also clearly an economic enterprise and it was thus decided to establish a semi-independent business enterprise – SAVETCON – a strategic decision that has proven to be an exceptional success.

Other vehicles for education

Journal of the South African Veterinary Association: The Journal of the SAVA, as it is now known, has had an illustrious history thanks to numerous excellent editors (Bigalke 2000) and reviewers over the years; the 84th volume is currently in production. It has achieved international status. A recent assessment *inter alia* states the following:

The editor and editorial board have good national and international disciplinary reputations and standing and the editorial board includes one member from the United States. The Journal is suitable as a general ongoing stimulus for local graduate students and young researchers in the discipline. It is comparable with international journals in the field. In addition, about 20% – 40% of articles have international collaboration. The Journal would appear to be of more interest to practising veterinarians than the Onderstepoort Journal of Veterinary Research, as the articles reflect less academic subjects generally, and there is more of scholarly interest, such as editorial comments and book reviews. (Report on peer review of scholarly journals in agricultural and related basic life sciences, ASSAF, August 2010)

VetNews: Similarly, the newsletter of the SAVA, *VetNews*, has developed from an elementary communication mechanism to a distinguished publication, which is the ultimate vehicle for Continued Professional Development (CPD)

and is now acknowledged by the South African Veterinary Council. This major new dimension that has fostered the principle of maintenance of professional expertise was the introduction and implementation of the principle of CPD. The requirements and administrative processes for CPD were initially rather informal and done in conjunction with the medical profession. This however changed dramatically when the Veterinary Council introduced compulsory activities as a prerequisite to maintain professional registration in 2003. Primarily based on the New Zealand model, one of the most significant features were the setting of criteria for CPD accreditation for congress presentations, and other formal and informal activities. The SAVA immediately supported these directives in many ways, one of the most important being the monthly publication of Question and Answer articles in *VetNews*. This major advance was largely based on the initiative of Professor B. Penzhorn.

Representation and communication

South African Veterinary Council

All professional organisations function within the bounds laid down by a society. It is the public who elect parliamentarians, who are ultimately responsible for the legislation that regulates the profession, its legal rights, public accountability and code of conduct. The SAVA and its individual members must however function in a wider society, first and foremost with its clients; this relationship is directed by the Veterinary Council. The Council, with the concomitant legislation, was established in 1982 with the promulgation of the *Veterinary and Para-veterinary Professions Act* (Act No 19 of 1982). With very minor and rare exceptions, the relationship between the SAVA and the Council has been responsible and constructive, taking all the parties' needs and realities into account.

Faculty of Veterinary Science

As stated already, the maintenance of expert technical acumen and contemporary knowledge are the cornerstones of a revered veterinary profession. Apart from the members themselves, a critical element is the continued integrated collaboration with the academic institutions. The profession's co-operation with the Onderstepoort Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria and the OVI (formerly the Veterinary Research Institute, Onderstepoort), has been outstanding and deserves a dissertation in its own right.

Public

An organisation that is only turned inwardly and only serves its own interests is eventually doomed to self-destruction and oblivion. Major focus is thus placed on public relations in all its dimensions.

As mentioned above, a profession functions within a community, not only as a source of survival and income but also as a body that carries a responsibility. Thanks to the vision and insight of colleagues, the SAVA's Community Veterinary Clinics (CVC) programme was established in July 1998 under the leadership of Dr Dean Sim. This was a

pilot project introduced as an effort to stop animal abuse and to provide direct access to primary health care for animal owners who are unable to afford the services of a private veterinarian (Kenyon 2010).

The vision and insight of colleagues such as Dean Sim and Dave Kenyon, as well as the passionate commitment of personnel such as Roenel Kenyon, Erna Klopper and Daleen Grundling who have been and are involved in the CVC programme, has secured its success. Even internationally, the SAVA is lauded for this unique enterprise.

Albeit with a totally different objective, another very laudable enterprise by the SAVA was the establishment of the Veterinary Foundation in 1998. In conjunction with the pharmaceutical industry, a fund was established to provide financial support, particularly for advanced research in the field of diseases of small animals, equines and wildlife. To generate income, a pet and an equine memorial fund was established whereby animal owners could donate funds and bequests to reflect their love and gratitude (Du Toit 2008).

Government structures

From the earliest days of South African history, there has been an exceptional accord between individual veterinarians and government officials on personal and collective levels, both internationally and nationally (Gutsche 1979). Although not always easy, every effort has consistently been made to maintain cordial and constructive relationships with government authorities at all levels, so that mutual interests can be pursued. No profession can operate independently of the policies of the prevailing government and, although communication is not always easy, it is generally constructive.

International

As the earliest veterinarians who worked in South Africa had qualified abroad, it was inevitable that academic and philosophic ties would be established internationally. This was initially on a personal basis, but as soon as the profession became organised, formal ties were forged (Gutsche 1979).

Dr Basil Pappin represented the SAVA at the World Veterinary Association (WVA) with enthusiasm and dedication for 25 years. He was succeeded by Professor Morkel Terblanche for a term from 1995 to 1999. In 1995, he attended the WVA meeting in Yohohama with Dr Pappin, where he was introduced to the Education Committee and was elected as a member. He also attended the WVA meeting in Paris in 1997 and the WVA congress in Lyon in 1999. Representation of the SAVA thereafter passed to Dr Anthony Erasmus, who has exercised his responsibilities with the same spirit and dedication as his predecessors from 2000 to date (A. Erasmus pers. comm., 2011).

Over decades, through diverse leadership, the SAVA *inter alia* has presented international conferences on buiatrics, sheep and pig diseases, as well as companion animals and others. All this culminated in the presentation of the WVC

in Cape Town in October 2011 after the bid was won in Minneapolis in 2005. The diversity of international relations is so complex and compounded by political processes that it deserves a dissertation in its own right.

Similarly, constructive and informative relationships have been formed with the International Veterinary Officers Council (IVOC), which will be hosted by the SAVA again this year.

The future?

Looking forward; where do we, as an association and the bearer of our members' interests, want to go? To answer this, the following questions need to be addressed:

- What are the major local needs?
- What are the major international trends?

When we have learnt from the past, let us put it behind us and look towards the future within the framework of:

- technological development
- sustainable food production
- the fundamental calling of the veterinary profession
- compassionate care of both production and companion animals and birds, as well as wildlife.

The ultimate message is therefore that we must collectively learn from history and pursue its good lessons. 'It pays to be associated' and '*Pristinae virtutis memores*' (Mindful of the power of virtue).

Acknowledgements

The author is greatly indebted to his friend and colleague Dr Rudolph Bigalke who made a major contribution to this

publication. Also to Dr Mary Louise Penrith for editing the references, Ms Marina Lubbe for compiling the power point presentation on which this is based and Elize Nicholas for her diligent typing. Publication of this article was sponsored by the History Committee of the South African Veterinary Association.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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