Pets, vets and one health

UNTIL recently, interest in the one health concept has focused mainly on disease interactions between people and production animals rather than people and companion animals, but that is now changing. In 2010, the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) launched a project aimed at increasing companion animal veterinarians’ involvement in one health (VR, November 6, 2010, vol 167, pp 723-724; November 27, 2010, vol 167, pp 847-849) and, in 2011, the WSAVA and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) signed an agreement aimed at taking the initiative further. As an association of associations, the WSAVA represents more than 80,000 small animal veterinarians around the world, while the OIE is the intergovernmental organisation responsible for improving animal health and welfare worldwide, as well as being responsible for global surveillance of animal diseases, including zoonoses. The agreement between the two organisations was significant because, until then, small animal practitioners had not been closely linked to the OIE, despite their expertise and their day-to-day contact with companion animals and their owners.

Recognising that human and animal health are interlinked, the one health concept aims to encourage human health and veterinary professionals to work together to eradicate disease. Given the close contact between people and their pets, it is clearly important to consider companion animals in developing the concept and efforts to ensure that this happens have now taken another step forward with the launch of a new website, which aims to provide direct access to scientific research and debates on zoonotic diseases transmitted by companion animals.

The website, www.callistoproject.eu, forms part of an international research project being financed by the European Commission and implemented by a consortium of research institutes, universities and veterinary associations. Called CALLISTO (for Companion Animals multisectoral, interprofessional, and Interdisciplinary Strategic Think tank: On zoonoses), the project aims to provide an overview of the current situation regarding the role of companion animals as a source of infectious diseases for people and livestock; over the next three years, through expert groups and a series of conferences, it plans to identify gaps in knowledge and technology concerning the most important zoonoses associated with keeping companion animals, and to propose targeted actions to prevent and reduce the health risks for both humans and farm animals.

Nine project partners, led by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), have been involved in developing the website, which is intended to provide a gateway to scientific research developed within the project, as well as to communicate the findings and disseminate the strategies that are developed more widely. Designed to be interactive, and to involve others in the opinions and recommendations that are generated, it aims to promote awareness of the objectives and activities of CALLISTO and to increase public awareness of the impact of companion animal zoonoses generally.

A wide range of expertise and disciplines have been brought together for the project. As well as the FVE, the main project partners are the University of Copenhagen; the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO); Erasmus MC (the University Medical Center, Rotterdam); the WSAVA; FECAVA (the Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations); the Giuseppe Caponale public health institute in Teramo, Italy; the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and the University of Bristol.

Improving understanding of zoonotic diseases forms only part of how one health concepts might be applied to improving human health, albeit a fairly important one. In launching its initiative in 2010, the WSAVA established a one health committee to look at this and two additional areas – the human-companion animal bond, and comparative and translational medicine. Details of its activities are available at www.wsava.org/OneHealth.htm, and an update on progress will be given at the WSAVA/FECAVA/BSAVA World Congress, which is being held in Birmingham this week (April 11 to 15).

Whether involving companion or production animals, application of the one health concept has much to offer in terms of improving human health (VR, September 10, 2011, vol 169, pp 231-235) and, looking to the future, it will be important to ensure that the human medical profession and agencies are more effectively engaged. So far, with one or two exceptions, most of the interest has been expressed by people in the veterinary world and it would be helpful if more in the medical profession were firmly on board.

doi: 10.1136/vr.e2642
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Veterinary Record 2012 170: 376
doi: 10.1136/vr.e2642

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