

#BlackLivesMatter to all of us

GEORGE Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. Three people who recently died in the US as a result of police heavy handedness – a consequence of antiblackness, systemic racism and institutionalised discrimination; particularly in relation to the black community.

The resulting Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has gripped the UK and the world over the past week. Protests have spread like wildfire at the injustices, particularly in the US.

Racism is very much alive in the UK and, by inference, veterinary medicine as well. The vet world has not entirely hidden away, with many joining and drawing attention to work by the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society and the student body, Animal Aspirations. Both initiatives were created off the back of the feeling that the vet world is quite an alienating place for many black and ethnic minorities. Their desire is to share a space with others who also feel that ostracising nature of a 97 per cent white-predominate community.

And who can blame them? Recently, BLM has been discussed on veterinary forums and social media and the resulting comments have been disappointing, with a sinister undertone of prejudice and resistance to BLM.

One can only wonder how many vets, nurses and staff saw these threads and how they felt. I will tell you how it feels to witness and be on the receiving end of racism. It is exhausting to be at work, at university, at congresses and have colleagues and clients make racist generalisations about yourself or other ethnicities.

The fear is that many vets in the UK don't ever want to accept that they are part of the problem. That problem manifests itself in conversations and behaviour that is deeply offensive (with or without conscious awareness). You may not appreciate that different races lead a sanitised version of reality. 'Whitewashed' is the term sometimes used to describe this.

Racism is not necessarily only about active or wilful actions. It is often unconscious and comes



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from an established power dynamic that sees those of different races on a sliding scale; black people often find themselves on the lowest end of that scale. Those who have never had to consider their race as a factor when applying for a job will have benefited from this unequal power dynamic.

Systematic racism is a vestige of colonialism, capitalism and slavery. It operates by maintaining and justifying racist behaviours.

So how can you start having that necessary but difficult internal conversation to challenge unconscious bias? I would recommend the book 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race' by Reni Eddo-Lodge as a good place to start. Many people have found this a light yet enlightening read. 'Orientalism' by Edward Said is also a great read, exploring how racism has been used to justify subjugation of many other parts of the world.

As vets, we are all part of a vet community but, as individuals, we belong to something much bigger. We are all striving to occupy and work through our single shot at earthly existence, unfettered and unimpeded. The BLM movement is organising around one simple premise: there is a humanity attached to black people but society robs us of that in the most gruesome of ways. It suppresses our best abilities, plurality and idiosyncrasies and instead replaces them with the dialogues that suit those who don't care about what we actually are.

Black people are the athletes and musicians and dancers of this world, but too rarely are they the CEOs, business leaders and the vets.

That's what this is entirely about. It's time to listen and learn and be educated. So we can all have a sense of being as vets, not as anything else. ●