

HSUS Agenda on Par with that of PETA By Patty Khuly, VMD

If you graduated from vet school after 1981, you've heard of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights. The AVAR is an organization of 3,000 vets dedicated to the protection of the rights of animals in laboratory, agriculture, wildlife, shelter and in-home settings.

On Jan. 14, the Humane Society of the United States launched a new organization in conjunction with AVAR inviting veterinarians to participate in an amalgamation of the two groups. It's calls the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Assn., or HSVMA.

In case you believe this alphabet soup has nothing to do with your life as a veterinarian, you may want to reconsider. The HSUS wants you to join the HSVMA. It entreats all vets to reject the AVMA's milquetoast stance on crucial animal-welfare imperatives, such as sow confinement, force-fed foie gras production and other practices that impinge on the basic rights of animals to live their lives free of human subjugation.

Come join the alternative movement to better the lives of animals beyond the scope of your daily practice, it urges. Specifically, the HSVMA has set its sights on young veterinarians who may elect not to walk lockstep with the AVMA on hot-button animal-welfare issues and for whom the AVMA looks more like a lineup of stodgy, white good ol' boys than the vets they looked up to in school.

On these grounds alone, I might consider myself a prime target for recruitment. In fact, many "new-generation" vets share my more "liberal" views on animal welfare and some frustration with the AVMA's slow acceptance of animal stewardship imperatives. In particular, we oppose many of the harsher animal industry practices. To us they seem seriously out of step with our profession's approach to small-animal medicine.

Inexorably increasing standards of care in pet medicine make for an ever more cavernous divide between companion animal and agricultural animal practitioners. The variously heralded and fretted "urbanization" and "feminization" of the profession arguably enhances this division.

The time is right for organizations like the HSUS to recruit veterinarians into its rank and file, essentially growing its power base through the prestige of veterinary professionals, even appropriating the "VMA"

acronym we've historically owned to make its point clear: The AVMA does not represent you on these issues. We do. This is your VMA.

Predictably, the AVMA opposes this organization on the grounds that science must direct its positions rather than the reactionary aims of certain groups that would reject its conclusions. In a Q&A regarding HSVMA published on the AVMA's website, its position is clarified: "[In making decisions on animal welfare issues], the AVMA regularly communicates with a broad range of stakeholders, including individuals and organizations associated with the animal protection community, the animal industries and governmental agencies."

Most of us in the welfare camp might urge the AVMA to look to its member constituents and the general public, two invested groups notably absent in this declaration. In fact, statements like this seem to fan the flames of those of us against the AVMA's chronically conciliatory approach to industry and government. Yet it's clear that representation of views now emerging from its own membership is not forthcoming.

Why should we not lock fists with the HSUS in its bid to win our hearts and minds through this nascent splinter group?

It's my belief that veterinarians disposed to such lures may want to more carefully consider shifting their allegiance. Though most of us may not be aware of it, the HSUS is increasingly wedded to the goals of organizations like PeTA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), especially as the HSUS's leader, Wayne Pacelle, is widely regarded as an emergently militant voice with respect to animal rights.

Despite his indefatigable drive to promote the image of the HSUS as a moderate one in tune with mainstream welfare groups, he is rejected by most of these.

Furthermore, Pacelle's successful courtship of AVAR in forming the HSVMA speaks against this public relations strategy. That's because AVAR's mission is very much in line with that of PeTA's.

While the AVAR and HSUS's tactics are more moderate and their approach infinitely more disciplined, the values they espouse are otherwise on par with PeTA's. A comparison of published position statements for all three organizations readily confirms this.

For those of you unaware of the details of this issue, let me explain that “animal rights” and “animal welfare” are two separate movements. The more moderate animal welfarists urge that animals should be cared for by veterinarians as stewards of their safety, health, comfort and general wellbeing.

Meanwhile, animal rightists consider animals morally indistinguishable from humans and deserving equal treatment with consideration for their limited cognitive abilities, much as children are regarded under our current laws.

The difference between these two camps is vast. One allows for “animal use” in agriculture and as companions while the other deems both conditions morally untenable in the long run.

Veterinarians viewed in the context of the rightist’s paradigm are ideally suited for wildlife and public health concerns—not for pet medicine and certainly not for the propagation of the animal agriculture industry. The AVAR and HSUS might dispute this, but for this vet and the vast majority of truly moderate animal-welfare groups across the country, their actions and position statements speak louder than their refutations.

While the HSUS may publicize more moderate positions with respect to animal cruelty in general, which welfarists like myself support, they also oppose all pet breeding, lab animal use, feline trap-neuter-return programs and animal product consumption.

Furthermore and most egregiously from the small-animal vet’s perspective, they reject the agenda of no-kill shelters in actively seeking better ways to save the lives of homeless animals, despite the recent success of many well-run municipal facilities in achieving these previously unrealized goals.

In fact, they actively support the principle that animals might be better served through euthanasia than placed in homes where their suffering and servitude might be exacerbated.

You may be surprised to hear that HSUS opposes the very existence of no-kill shelters and that PeTA shelters euthanized 97 percent of their charges in 2006 (by their own count). Compare that to the 34 percent average euthanasia rate in shelters nationwide and it becomes clear that

PeTA and HSUS are not the blanket defenders of animals we may have expected.

Moreover, the HSUS has gone to great lengths to distinguish itself from the militancy of PeTA, but nonetheless defends the same hard-line agenda—albeit without the violence and lawless behavior. It seeks its goals more insidiously through under-the-radar political activities, primarily because it still serves moderate and militant wings of both pro-animal movements in the U.S. through its broad agenda.

While it courts dollars from its largely moderate welfarist base, the HSUS continues to promote its rightist agenda disingenuously. This approach has earned Pacelle the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” reputation among conventional animal-welfare organizations.

While HSUS (and now the HSVMA) may champion the laudable values many more idealistic vets are inclined to agree with, thus garnering our support based on mutual goals, it’s my view that too much of its less-publicized agenda diverges from our mainstream views.

The AVMA officials who still represent veterinarians’ moderate welfarist voices would be well advised to consider that tides are shifting in our profession and that it may be increasingly difficult to straddle the chasm between the stalwart agricultural and companion-animal contingencies it currently serves. Viewed in that light, it would seem to be in AVMA’s best long-term interest to look to the burgeoning ranks of its traditionally less-consulted constituents and our values.

Very soon, it may no longer be enough for AVMA to offer PLIT (Professional Liability Insurance Trust) to maintain our membership. Predictably, the HSUS will soon offer up its own version as its coffers bloat with the cachet veterinarians contribute to its causes.

And these colleagues cast adrift through ideological disparities would be a bad thing indeed for the AVMA, our profession and animal welfare in general as we know it.

Dr. Khuly blogs regularly at www.dolittler.com.