

Making the Vet Industry more Sustainable

Top 5 Tips you can Initiate in your Practice

Sustainability has become a buzzword in the twenties. COP26 and extreme weather events have pushed it even further up the agenda for governments, companies and individuals.

In its broadest sense it means much more than doing something for the planet and it may be argued that we have gone beyond sustainability to a more seismic requirement to regenerate. Sustainability is also about people and animals but also companies and professions. Some would argue that the veterinary industry itself is not sustainable at the moment due to factors like the shortage of vets due to Brexit; the effect of the pandemic on professionals' mental health; the explosion in pet numbers due to lockdown and the attendant pressure on already poorly staffed practices. This is an incredibly complex issue that needs to be approached in a holistic manner. However, the purpose of this article is to look at how the veterinary industry can become more eco-friendly in the choices that many businesses make corporately and individually. It will also point out some of the amazing initiatives already taking place. As mentioned previously, the topic of how to be more environmentally aware is becoming more popular and is linked also with mental health. Multiple studies have shown that spending time in a nature-enriched environment is good for mental well-being. At the recent Webinar Vet Virtual Congress Dr. Catriona Mellor introduced the concept of solastalgia. Solastalgia is defined as an existential dread for the future of the planet and often afflicts the young. It leaves people thinking that it is not worth making any effort to save the planet. However, if we begin to take actions to improve our environment this will help us to become more optimistic about the future of our planet. Small actions multiplied many times over by businesses and individuals can have a massive impact. All of this will improve mental well-being as well as the well-being of the planet.

Craig Bennett, the CEO of the Wildlife Trusts, explained the importance of the veterinary industry in being leaders to other industries and members of the public in a recent podcast (VetChat). What vets do in their practices matter! They are highly trusted members of their local communities. People in the community look at what happens at the vets. If the vet has solar panels on the roof; a wildflower garden as you enter the practice and educates people about wildlife, then those people in the community may follow suit. Therefore, there can be a massive additional effect if the industry becomes more involved in this area.

Climate change

At the recent Webinar Vet virtual Congress, an afternoon was set aside to discuss environmental issues at The Sustainability Summit. Over 300 people attended the live event demonstrating that the industry is already embracing the concept of sustainability and regeneration of the environment.

3 main areas need to be examined as an industry

1. Climate change
2. Resource use
3. Biodiversity

At COP26, Alok Sharma, the president of the Congress, summed up by saying that he and the official delegates can now say with credibility that we have kept 1.5 degrees alive but its pulse is weak and it will only survive if we keep our promises and translate commitments into rapid actions. The UK held the presidency at last year's event in Glasgow which happens annually. The Paris Agreement set an upper limit of 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels to prevent severe climate change leading to sea level rises, droughts and wildfires which will lead to further positive feedback accelerating the deteriorating situation. Temperature increases are correlated with the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is the main greenhouse gas but there are other much more potent substances like anaesthetics and refrigerants as well. Carbon dioxide is released by burning fossil fuel; cutting or burning tracts of forests; extracting peat for garden use or ploughing fields.

Resource use

Running a business uses resources. These are often reused or need to be disposed of. One of the mantras of the environmental movement is reduce, reuse, recycle and this is an important mantra to remember in practice. Can less material be used to bandage your dog's leg without reducing the effectiveness of the bandage? Do drapes, gowns and hats need to be used only once or can material be chosen that can be used several times after appropriate sterilization? How much can plastic usage be reduced by a practice and are there suitable services for increasing plastic recycling? These are all questions that a modern veterinary practice must begin to ask.

Biodiversity

COP26's prime aim was to reduce carbon usage but COP15 is happening in China this year and will be focusing on biodiversity. Our environmental crisis is made up of several elements: climate change due to increasing carbon in the atmosphere; seas polluted by plastics and a loss of species across the world due to loss of habitat: use of chemicals or hunting. These three topics must be dealt with together. Planting non-native pine trees will help eventually with carbon capture but will likely be sterile places for native birds and insects. As a young boy I used to wake up to the sound of house sparrows chirping in the elm trees on my road in inner-city Liverpool. The trees were later removed due to disease and the sparrows gradually disappeared. 50 years later there are 50 million fewer sparrows in the UK. Sparrows require a mixed diet including insects. Potent insecticides used in gardens and farms have reduced populations of insects some of which may be deemed pests, but often beneficial insects are killed by these indiscriminate molecules. The EU has banned 74 pesticides because of health or environmental concerns; however, these substances can sometimes be found in food imported into the UK from other countries. Where the substances have not been banned. Indeed, some of these substances are manufactured in the UK and the EU before being exported abroad. It is essential that countries work together to ensure that biodiversity is increased. Dangerous chemicals should be banned globally; birds that migrate between different countries need protection at both of their home bases and over the areas in which they travel. International agreements are very important, and the UN leads the way in bringing countries to the table and debating them at COP conferences. At COP26, 197 countries signed an accord

committing to a phasing-down rather than a phasing-out of fossil fuels. Whilst this was not the best solution, gaining consensus from 197 countries was a huge feat of diplomacy. COP15 is taking place on May 20–22 in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast looking at how to stop desertification. The UN estimates that over 40% of land is degraded worldwide. An area of forest the size of Italy was cut down in 2016 and about 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions come from the clearing of tropical forests.

Later on in 2022, COP15 will continue in Kunming, China. One of the key parts of the deal being negotiated known as the post-2020 biodiversity framework is a goal to make 30% of land and seas into protected areas by 2030. To put this into context the UK is the most nature-depleted nation in the G7. Over the past decade, the UK has failed to meet most of its international targets to prevent declines in the state of nature. This is often because targets are not joined up across government departments to address biodiversity loss. Much of the UK's protected land like national parks was set up for people's enjoyment, not for the benefit of nature and are often deserts of grass with little biodiversity.

There are 3 constituents involved in improving our natural world governments businesses and individuals. Whilst governments have done some good work, for example, encouraging uptake of electric cars through tax breaks, they often move slowly and don't keep to their promises. The role of individuals and large and small businesses to help make our planet a better place to live cannot be overstated. Anders Holch Povlsen has used personal wealth to purchase 221,000 acres for the purpose of rewilding this makes him the largest landowner in Scotland.

Recently, it was reported that Vets4pets partnered with the Woodland Trust to protect 20,000 hectares of woodland.

How can a practice owner make their practice more sustainable? Here are 5 tips:

One

The crisis in the Ukraine has encouraged European countries to be less dependent on Russian oil and gas but prices for fuel have skyrocketed. Whilst this will undoubtedly cause hardship over the next few years, it should be a catalyst to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels for heating our houses, clinics and for our cars. Every practice needs to become more energy conscious. It is worth fitting a smart meter in the business and purchase the most energy-efficient equipment like computers, ultrasounds etc. Low energy lighting with motion sensors fitted will massively reduce energy use and save money. Insulating buildings more effectively and considering the most energy efficient boiler or fitting an air-source heat pump, whilst expensive, will reduce energy usage further. Installing solar panels will produce local energy which can be stored in batteries or exported back into the grid. They can also charge electric vehicles for practice visits. Range between charges and availability of public chargers can be a problem but is improving year-on-year. Using a sustainable energy supplier like Good Energy or Ecotricity which can provide carbon neutral electricity is a very quick win on any practice's journey to carbon-neutral status. Changing suppliers may be difficult during this time of crisis and will be impossible if the practice is in a contract.

Two

Carbon dioxide is not the only greenhouse gas. The substances used to anaesthetise animals like nitrous oxide, isoflurane and sevoflurane are potent greenhouse gases too. Jones and West at Davies Vet Specialists has done fabulous work on reminding the profession of their potency and suggesting ways that these gases can be reduced by safely reducing flow rates during

surgery and curtailing the most potent substance nitrous oxide in clinical use. Similarly, the gases used in fridges and freezers and air conditioners such as HFC-134a has a global warming potential 3,400 times that of carbon dioxide. They are being phased out; however, older units may contain them so careful recycling is important.

Three

The concept of reducing, reuse, recycle is well embedded in environmentally aware people. The concept of consuming less has been well covered in Jen Gale's book Sustainable. Jen did not buy anything new apart from food for a full year and relied on reusing already owned articles. The problem with recycling is that it sometimes is sent abroad and dumped and contaminated matter cannot be recycled. Care is needed. However, with all environmental audits a thorough approach to recycling is very important. Of course, in the clinical setting much can be done to reduce consumption through careful rotation of stock; not ordering too much and recycling hard to recycle waste like PPE in zero waste boxes as a pilot study of vetPartners proved and also in the longer run committing to a zero to landfill policy as IVCEvidensia have done have by 2025.

Four

Plant some wildflowers in your outside areas. Not only will they improve the mental health of the team but a recent study in the Journal of Insect Conservation reported that a 2 meter by 2-meter plot of wildflowers resulted in 111 percent more bumblebees, 87 percent more solitary bees and 85% more solitary wasps than in unmodified gardens. The veterinary team can also encourage farmers to farm in a more environmentally friendly way through the new Defra agricultural stewardship schemes.

Five

Join an accreditation scheme and commit to a timespan for getting the accreditation. The body will hold you accountable and will ensure that you are running a sustainable business. More and more people are understanding the importance of sustainability in all businesses and businesses will be perceived in a bad light by suppliers, customers and staff if they are not beginning on the journey of sustainability. The beginning is always the most difficult but small steps made consistently by many practices will make a big difference.

REFERENCES

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opinion practice and dermatology referrals until 2016. In 2010 Anthony set up The Webinar Vet, the first online training platform for veterinarians and nurses, in an attempt to make veterinary education more accessible and affordable across the world. The Webinar Vet's first virtual conference took place in 2013. During the pandemic, The Webinar Vet helped to take over 40 veterinary meetings and conferences online including WVAC2020 and WCVD9.