The Sustainable Veterinary Plan for the Future What it Looks Like and How to Action it

This summer has seen unprecedented temperatures in the UK and across Europe. Most people see this as a consequence of humankind's activities over the last century which has seen high levels of deforestation, increased burning of fossil fuels, an increase in the levels of plastic in the environment and a reduction in biodiversity. All of these changes have led to sea level rises, extreme weather and unsafe air and land pollution.

COP26 set a target of trying to keep temperature rises below 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels. This will only happen with a concerted effort from government, industries and individuals. However, it is still possible particularly if everybody believes it is!

The veterinary industry is made up of several parts:

1. Associations and industry bodies like RCVS, BVA, BSAVA, BCVA and Vet Sustain.
2. Corporate practices like IVC Evidensia and Medivet.
3. Independent practices.
4. Veterinary businesses like MSD, ManyPets, Idexx and MWI.
5. Individual vets, nurses and support staff that make practice happen.

Building a sustainable veterinary plan for the future will require all these bodies to work together cooperatively to build something robust but innovative enough to meet the challenges of the next decade.

The RCVS recently announced a practice standards award in sustainability. Vet Sustain has produced the Veterinary Green Checklist in association with BVA, BVNA and SPVS. This is a fabulous guide to help the veterinary practice move towards a more sustainable future and is worth reading if a practice is wondering how to start its journey.[1]

Corporate veterinary practices are beginning to offer advice to individual practices from their head offices but are also producing documents stating their goals in environmental, social and governance (ESG) areas. These documents are very important starting points. Companies that commit their visions to paper are much more likely to succeed in their goals.[2]

Independent practices do not have the resources or the central help to work on environmental improvements like the corporate groups. However, if the veterinary team is passionate about the environment, they can often move quicker than the corporate groups in moving their plans forward. There are some great new practices like Eco Vets in Wandsworth who have placed sustainability and regeneration at the centre of what they do as they set up their new practice.[3]

Businesses supporting practices will increasingly be asked about their own ESG strategies as corporate and independent practices begin to ask companies how they can help them become more sustainable. When a veterinary practice begins to work out its carbon usage it also needs to consider how products are produced and transported to the practice by third-party companies, so-called scope 3 emissions. Practices need to start encouraging their suppliers to think about how they can work more sustainably. Many businesses are already starting to move in the right direction with this. For example, the wholesaler, MWI, is beginning to introduce electric vehicles and also reduce deliveries to practices in an attempt to reduce business mileage. Target setting in this area should be science-based to be credible.

Of course, all the planning will lead to nothing if the veterinary team has not bought into the policy. Individual vets and nurses also have a responsibility to promote sustainability to the wider community which they can do by promoting what they are doing via social media, websites, newsletters and practice notice boards. In the end, it is up to the frontline team to turn off lights, pack the dishwasher efficiently and not print unnecessarily.

Any business wanting to set up a sustainable plan for the future must begin to look at:

- Carbon reduction
- Decreasing resource use
- Increasing and restoring biodiversity

Carbon Reduction

The first stage of reducing carbon is to measure current and historical levels and then set achievable reduction targets. Ideally, all businesses need to work out their route to carbon neutrality. Achieving this by 2030 is ambitious but achievable for most veterinary businesses. Present carbon usage suggests that the world will use up its carbon store in the next 10 years to keep us below 1.5 degrees centigrade. Businesses will need to reduce their carbon usage by 50% over the next decade to keep the 1.5 degrees target safe. This will be tougher the longer businesses take to start.

There are online carbon calculators available, but it is worth considering taking on a consultancy firm to help work out the carbon output of the business directly and indirectly. Carbon calculators include the government's Mackay Carbon Calculator and carbonfootprint.com.

When considering carbon output from direct sources the main inputs come from energy usage and travel plus the use of gaseous anaesthetics which can have a profound effect on greenhouse gas emissions as they are much more potent than carbon dioxide.

Once carbon has been measured, a roadmap should be set up to see how carbon usage can be reduced on a yearly basis. Bigger companies often have to decide how to reduce carbon over several years whilst staying within corporate budgets. Some methods which will reduce carbon usage such as fitting air-source heat pumps and solar panels can be expensive in the short term from a capital perspective and will take several years to pay back, although, this time is shortening given our ongoing energy crisis. Government could step up here and make it cheaper for businesses to fit these advanced technologies.

Our privatised energy industries are in a mess at the moment and moving suppliers may be difficult at this time. However, all veterinary businesses should be looking to buy their energy from sustainable energy sources. A lot of our electricity now comes from wind and solar sources with companies like Good Energy and SSE leading the way. Some of these companies will also produce green gas which is often offset for conservation projects throughout the world.

Veterinary practices can go even further by buying the most energy-efficient devices from washing machines to computers and televisions. At the end of the day, all non-essential devices should be turned off. If it is possible to have a drying room which is maybe situated by the boiler then this will be more effective than having a tumble drier particularly if the boiler is the most energy efficient one available.

Finally, as energy prices skyrocket, all of these strategies plus LED lighting and motion sensors for lighting will not only reduce carbon but will also have massive cost benefits. This crisis may, coincidentally, make us more environmentally aware.

Resource Use

Less than 10% of medical plastic is recycled. There is huge waste in the veterinary industry from excess packaging, single-use items and general waste. This is also an opportunity in that there is huge potential for improvement.

Reduce, reuse, and recycle have become a mantra for environmentalists in their battle against waste.

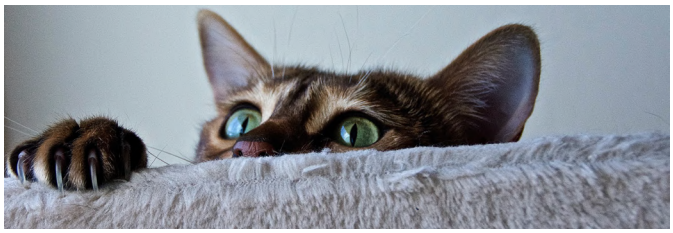
Reducing the production of waste is always the first option. Can packaging be reduced with pharmaceuticals? Becton Dickinson's emerald range of syringes contains 30% less plastic than similar syringes. In the end, the practice should be attempting to reduce the use of all plastics which can take up to 500 years to decompose. If the practice is using dog poo bags they should always be biodegradable otherwise the solution is worse than the problem.

It is worth considering which items are used regularly in veterinary practice and whether a reusable option is available. Some examples include scrub caps, operating gowns, and instrument containers for operations. All of these measures will further reduce the amount of waste produced.

When waste is produced it must be separated into different types of waste. If clinical waste contaminates paper waste, it cannot be recycled. Careful sorting is important to increase recycling rates whilst following the stringent laws around the disposal of medical waste. Many practices during the pandemic were producing massive quantities of PPE. Companies like TerraCycle can be helpful in disposing of these items in a safe and sustainable way.

Biodiversity

The veterinary profession should be rightly concerned about the reduction of biodiversity globally but also closer to home. I live in Britain which is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Over 97% of our wildflower meadows have been destroyed since the second world war. This has been mostly done in the cause of "progress" as fertilisers and herbicides are used to "improve" the sward leading to a more uniform monoculture of grasses which usually support very little wildlife. The recent popularity of sowing wildflower meadows at work and home is to be celebrated and encouraged but vets should be at the forefront of encouraging farmers to look after their land in a more extensive way. Excessive worming of livestock may damage



the ecology of the system by killing beneficial insects such as dung beetles which increase the organic matter of the soil. The same can be said for insecticides used to protect crops but have deleterious effects on humans and beneficial health. The European Union have banned 74 pesticides because of health or environmental concerns. However, these substances can sometimes be found in food imported into the EU. Now that Britain has left the EU it's important that agricultural and veterinary companies keep up the high standards and, if necessary, stop producing them in other countries.

Finally, members of the public watch what we vets do. If they can see that we are committed to the environment through our actions such as placing solar panels on our roofs or planting a wildflower meadow in front of our practices and businesses, they will be encouraged to follow our lead.

Putting a veterinary action plan together and then following through with it, can sound difficult. Most practices and businesses are very busy. However, the climate crisis is a potentially existential problem. If we, as vets and nurses, are not interested in the planet, people and animals who will be! Rome was not built in a day and neither will our action plans come to fruition immediately. There is always more to do and learn. If we can come together as a veterinary community on this, we can take action and learn together.

REFERENCES

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2. https://ivcevidensia.com/how-we-work/sustainability/
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