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21st century vets: professional dynamics in the era of One Health

Laure Bonnaud¹ · Nicolas Fortané¹

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2020. An infectious disease caused by a coronavirus (CoV) known as SARS-CoV-2, identified in China at the end of 2019, is affecting the entire world. This type of infection is common in both animals and humans, and coronaviruses are sometimes zoonotic, i.e. transmissible between animals and humans. The OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) thus reports that MERS-CoV (at the origin of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome in 2012) was transmitted from dromedary camels to man, whilst the transmission to man of the SARS-CoV coronavirus (which affected several Asian countries in 2003 and triggered a global alert from the WHO) involved bats and civets. The current pandemic is now spreading from human to human. Investigations are nevertheless continuing to identify its exact origin and the hypothesis of an animal source (bat? pangolin? mink?) is under consideration. For several years now, we have known that nearly 75% of emerging infectious diseases are of zoonotic origin and several experts now believe that the emergence of new diseases at the human-animal interface will be recurrent in years to come: ecosystems are undergoing profound changes due to global warming, damage to biodiversity or the development of industrial livestock farming, that favour the emergence and spread of pathogens through the density, confinement or circulation of animals.

In such a context, veterinary knowledge and skills are gaining unprecedented visibility, both in terms of understanding and managing changes in the relationships between humans and animals, and in terms of contributing to global health, in line with the ‘One Health’ perspective (animal, environmental and human health) that has been promoted by international institutions (OIE, WHO, FAO) since the early 2000s. Furthermore, since the beginning of the pandemic, veterinarians have been amongst the workers essential to the management of COVID-19 in some countries: veterinary laboratories have been mobilised to screen and analyse samples taken from humans (both for surveillance and diagnostic activities); veterinary clinics have donated equipment, such as respirators; veterinary researchers have been mobilised to epidemiologically model the pandemic or to sit on certain expert committees advising governments.

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These various elements attest to the veterinary profession's involvement in public health matters, in some updated ways that link them more directly to the activity of the medical professions.

However, the inclusion of veterinarians within the ranks of health professions is nothing new; on the contrary, it is one of the historical components of their professionalisation. Over the years, they have contributed to the safety of the food chain through the inspection of foodstuffs of animal origin, the management of zoonoses and the limitation of antibiotic use in order to preserve human therapeutic opportunities. By gaining recognition from public authorities for their contributions to medical knowledge and practices, veterinarians have also earned a legal monopoly on animal health, with specific training in dedicated schools and curricula, and institutions responsible for professional self-regulation. Over the course of its history, the veterinary profession has also laid claim to an expert role in the development of agriculture, not only in the service of healthy but also productive animal husbandry. Since the Second World War, in many countries, veterinarians' contribution to agricultural modernisation and industrialisation has steadily grown. This professional positioning, which combines medical and agronomic expertise, has created a unique jurisdiction and has led to many situations of competition with other professional groups: doctors for the management of epidemics, biologists and pharmacists for medical laboratories or drug production, livestock farmers and technicians for animal care, toxicologists, chemists and hygienists for food safety, etc.

From the standpoint of the sociology of the professions, these developments are classic and are the subject of analyses that are very similar even though they concern different countries: the members of a professional group are granted specific rights which are embodied in a legal monopoly that is contested in practice by members of other groups, more or less closely related, who also claim expertise on specific matters or acts. However, at the beginning of this twenty-first century, various developments are weakening 'professions' as a form of social organisation, both for veterinarians and for other groups such as doctors or lawyers. Here, we refer to the States themselves which are the guarantors of the professional monopoly but now tending to change their methods of government—via New Public Management for example—and to reduce the scope of their interventions, particularly in terms of budget. The same is true of the professionals' clients, who are better educated and better informed, and who are likely to challenge the expertise of those they consult. Finally, the evolution of certain markets (pharmaceuticals, agri-food, health) are tending to de-specialise the role of established professions, which are now finding themselves subordinated to powerful private actors. The articles in this special issue are all based on this tradition of the sociology of the professions, which they revisit through their own specific fields.

Approximately 10 years ago the journal devoted an initial special issue to the veterinary profession (Muller 2009). If we compare the two issues, the evolution and broadening of the subject matter is striking. Whereas the 2009 issue was heavily focused on food safety, the themes are now more diverse, with animal health questions taking precedence over other matters.

This is evidenced in the first article by Bonnaud and Fortané, which puts forward a state of the art of social science work on the veterinary profession and identifies the subjects of interest over the last 10 years or so: the socio-demographic changes in the profession, the deepening of our understanding of its history and its professionalisation

(in an ever-increasing number of countries), the specificities of small animal medicine, the profession's adaptation to the industrialisation of agriculture and, finally, its participation in the government of global health. More broadly, the article shows the undeniable development of this field of social sciences since the regular appearances of major animal health crises in the news, and highlights subjects of research that might open up in the near future.

Berdah links the professionalisation of veterinarians to the development of sera and vaccines in the twentieth century. In this article, she uses the example of the many veterinary initiatives to develop a serum against foot-and-mouth disease during the inter-war period, which allows her to bring a fresh perspective to the medical anchoring of the profession and to challenge the vision of France as a country with a centralised and interventionist approach to the management of epizootics. She also shows how veterinarians gradually developed a central role in the drug market, through privileged relations with the pharmaceutical industry and the (slow) construction of their legitimacy amongst livestock farmers, long before they were finally granted a legal monopoly on the prescription and sale of drugs.

Kjæmpenes focuses on how veterinarians have been gradually side-lined from fish health management on salmon farms in Norway. Their attachment to antibiotic treatment rather than the vaccination favoured by fish farmers and the fish farming industry has gradually led to their monopoly of expertise being lost to marine biologists. This a priori exceptional case, directly linked to a specific type of animal health crisis management (vibriosis, or Hitra's disease), shows how a jurisdiction often thought to be untouchable (the prescription of drugs) can nevertheless be successfully challenged by competing professional groups.

Surdez, Piquerez and Hobeika analyse Switzerland's implementation of a policy to fight antimicrobial resistance and show that it tends to accentuate public authorities' control over veterinary practices, even though representatives of the profession manage to limit its effects. This article also offers insights into a particular segment of the profession, namely the veterinary inspectors in charge of the construction and implementation of animal health policy, which in Switzerland has its own internal divisions (between the federal and cantonal levels in particular) and which is subject to competition with other professional groups within the administration.

Taking the case of French veterinarians specialising in pig and poultry production in France, Fortané shows how the development of preventive veterinary medicine served as a basis for the diversification of professional expertise, whilst at the same time paradoxically causing veterinary practices to be dependent on a single activity—that of selling drugs. This article thus offers a reinterpretation of contemporary debates on the problem of antimicrobial resistance, which often put forward preventive approaches as a solution for transforming the economic and professional model of veterinarians, ignoring the fact that it is the entire structure of the drug and veterinary services markets that is at stake in the overuse of antibiotics in livestock farming.

Finally, Poirel examines the long-term relationship between veterinarians and animal activists in France. He shows that the members of these two groups share a history that has influenced both veterinary practices and the ways in which animal activists have been mobilised. This article thus offers an original interpretation of the history of two socio-professional groups that contemporary debates on animal welfare generally put into opposition, whereas their intersecting paths are far richer and more complex.

Whilst these two groups may have been in conflict between the late 1800s and the mid-1900s (particularly with regard to the controversies surrounding vivisection), they also shared common struggles—on animal protection issues for example. They now find themselves in ambivalent situations, between competition and collaboration, depending on the stances taken by their different socio-professional and militant segments (particularly reformists vs. abolitionists within animal activist movements).

The breadth of the six articles presented in this special issue lies in their analysis of the veterinary profession in different national contexts, in Norway, Switzerland and France, with frequent references to Great Britain where the social science literature on veterinarians is well developed. The articles cross perspectives on the same theoretical framework. However, none of them considers systematic comparisons of national situations or looks at international spaces and circulations as such. In the European area, historical research has shown that the professionalisation processes of veterinarians have a ‘family resemblance’, but the way in which certain issues are constructed undoubtedly remains specific to certain countries. For example, the management of epizootic diseases, the dynamics of the agricultural industrialisation, the relation to pets, the regulation of prescription and sale of medicines, etc. may differ according to the context and probably create variations between professional dynamics. Moreover, as for other professional groups (e.g. lawyers), internationalisation is a major issue for veterinarians. Arrangements for mutual recognition of diploma exist, and many veterinarians have now been trained in countries other than the country in which they work. Ultimately, depending on national contexts, the role, practices, employment and social status of veterinarians are not always similar. Research on the inter- and transnational dimensions of professional dynamics is probably the next step in social science research on veterinarians. May a new RAFA special issue address this in a few years’ time!

Reference

- Muller, S. (2009). Introduction. Quels effets des politiques de santé publique sur la profession vétérinaire? *Review of Agricultural and Environmental Studies*, 90(4), 365–371.

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