

VETERINARY MEDICINE – A CORNERSTONE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Public health achievements are the result of the knowledge, actions and efforts of several disciplines and professions. Veterinary medicine and the work of veterinarians contribute to public health in many sectors in a significant manner. The role of the veterinarians in public health has been important from 18th century to this date and it has increased substantially during the last decades. The primary reasons in a modern society to educate veterinarians are to protect human health and national economy. The role of veterinarians in small animal health is of course important, but the main tasks are still in food safety and environmental health control.

The aim of food safety and environmental health control is to ensure a healthy living environment for people, which includes food and drinking water, swimming water, indoor-air quality and product safety control, animal welfare and prevention of communicable animal diseases and zoonotic agents. E.g. diseases transmitted from animals to humans via food and water is one of the most important issues in human health worldwide, because they cause death and huge economic losses for governments. It is therefore not an overstatement to say, that the understanding of food and water safety are a basis for human health.

Veterinary curriculum offers a broad education and unique combination of topics directly and indirectly influencing the health of humans. The above mentioned issues are incorporated in the curriculum of the basic studies in many EU-countries. Finnish veterinary curriculum contains extensive studies in food hygiene and environmental health e.g. food borne pathogens, food processes, meat inspection, water safety, chemical safety, legislative, administrative and inspection skills. The curriculum is constructed according to the “from stable to table” approach, which gives the veterinarians a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing public health. In addition, many veterinarians specialize in public health in a national or EU-scale specializing program. These skills should be effectively utilized in society.

In Finland about one third of the veterinarians work with public health issues in local food and environmental health units, in central authority agencies, ministry, science and slaughterhouses. Expertize of veterinarians is still very much needed in slaughterhouses because public health, animal communicable diseases and animal welfare issues are all present there. It could be said that the official veterinarian is located on a hot spot, which requires skills and alertness for early identification of problems. Many veterinarians also act as head of the local environmental health and food control units due to the expert skills in e.g. food and water safety and the holistic approach to public health. Together with other professions the veterinarians give a significant input to the public health sector.