

PROMOTING DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSIVENESS IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION



The veterinary profession has a very diverse clientele. This diversity poses a challenge, of equity and inclusiveness in veterinary practice. Diversity, Equity & Inclusiveness (DEI) practices help to provide care tailored to meet the unique needs of diverse populations, including under-served communities. In this blog, Devesh Thakur explores the importance of DEI practises in the provision of first-class animal care by veterinary professionals.

CONTEXT

Diversity, equity, and inclusiveness have gained worldwide prominence across all sectors. The Google search of the words 'diversity', 'equity', and 'inclusion/inclusiveness' has increased by 700 percent since 2020 (Source: Google Trends 2023). The top universities of the world – such as Harvard Medical School, Yale, and Stanford School of Medicine – are embracing the measures of diversity, equity and inclusiveness in their institutions. Multinational Corporations (Facebook/Amazon/Microsoft, etc.) have embraced Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness/Inclusion (DEI) measures. The Indian corporate sector has published a manual on DEI practices in the workplace (Assocham 2022). Sports bodies around the world (Sports Ireland, England Cricket Board, Cricket Australia) also have equity, diversion, and inclusion policies in place. As in all other sectors veterinary institutions in the USA and Europe have embraced DEI. Some of the noteworthy ones are the America Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the British Veterinary Association, and several other vet schools in the US and UK. With these developments, it becomes essential to understand the concept of Diversity, Equity & Inclusiveness in the Veterinary Profession.



Diversity, equity and inclusiveness are three interconnected terms. It is only in combination that their true impact will emerge (McKinsey 2022). Despite the renewed energy around DEI, there remains a noticeable lack of clarity around each of these terms ([What Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Really Mean ideal.com](#)). Therefore, it's important to understand these terms first before recognising their relevance in the veterinary profession (Box 1).

Box 1: Definitions: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Diversity: Recognizing and celebrating differences in people, including various characteristics that distinguish individuals from one another (University of California - Berkeley 2015; McKinsey 2022).

Equity: Ensuring fair treatment for all individuals, including the identification and elimination of systemic and structural barriers that prevent participation in the workforce (University of California - Berkeley 2015; McKinsey 2022; Hirasuna et al. 2023).

Inclusion: Creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and valued, including providing access to resources, involvement in work groups, and the ability to influence organization-wide decisions (University of California - Berkeley 2015; Hirasuna et al. 2023; McKinsey 2022).

Together, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion promote a workplace culture that values and respects differences, ensures fairness, and enables everyone to make meaningful contributions.

"Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard." (Liz Fosslien)

WHY DO DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSIVENESS MATTER IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness have gained prominence in the veterinary profession. The goal is to provide educational experiences about varied forms of livestock production to students from diverse backgrounds who are interested in becoming veterinarians (Cannedy 2016). Increased diversity improves access to healthcare in the regions where serious forms of socio-economic, regional and other disparities exist. It can lead to accelerated advances in veterinary medical research as greater diversity in backgrounds and experiences of researchers shape their critical thinking. Diversity also encourages active thinking. There are three important reasons why DEI practices are important for those in the veterinary profession. These are:

Implementing DEI practices can help to overcome errors in decision-making by veterinarians while performing their jobs

The literature review suggests that this concept has origins primarily in the USA and UK. The veterinary profession is among the least diverse professions in the US (American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges). Further, like other human beings, veterinarians can have unconscious biases. Groupthink, unconscious biases, and cultural incompetence are common problems among vets (Khuly 2020). These cognitive biases routinely impact the decisions of veterinarians. Furthermore, these biases create barriers and disparities in animal care based on the background of ownership. By implementing DEI practices veterinary professionals can mitigate the impact of these biases and ensure that every animal and its owner receive equitable and fair treatment.

Implementing DEI practices can overcome disparities in animal care arising from owners' background

Research suggests that low-income clients face barriers when seeking clinical/advisory services from vets. Inaccessibility, poor communication, lack of empathy, and cultural incompetence are some of these barriers. For example, people with disabilities, women, and the poorest of the poor livestock owners have limited access to competent veterinary care. The clientele in the veterinary profession is very diverse.

Clientele ranges from urban affluent women pet owners to aged single women undertaking backyard poultry enterprises. Similarly, when it comes to animal care the needs range from those of educated youth engaged in commercial livestock farming to migratory pastoralists. Limited veterinary diversity creates challenges in the provision of access to veterinary care in areas with socio-economic and other demographic diversities. This gap is normally filled by para-veterinary staff which results in compromised quality of service. Thus, the veterinary sector needs diversity in terms of professionals so that the profession's ability to provide quality care is enhanced. DEI practices in veterinary medicine would enable the sector to better serve a diverse population (Burkhard et al. 2022). A diverse population of veterinarians will see the same problem in different ways, broadening the approach to solutions, and promoting innovation (Packer 2021). Moreover, a varied and diverse range of knowledge and experience in the veterinary profession is better suited for the development of new services and processes to meet diverse demographic needs (RCVS 2019).



DEI practices ensure that animals are not neglected due to demographic differences



Women, and the poorest of the poor livestock owners have limited access to competent veterinary care (Source: <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/veterinary-care-for-animals-of-indias-rural-poor/>)



Meeting diverse client needs is important. Here we see the yak rearing community inspecting the needs of a breedable male yak in Kugti, Bharmour, Himachal Pradesh.

Implementing DEI practices can reduce job stress and improve a sense of belonging in the workspace and profession

Lack of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness (DEI) in the veterinary profession has been identified as one of the factors for increased stress among veterinarians across demographics (British Veterinary Association 2019). Student discrimination is a serious issue attributable to ethnic diversity at most veterinary universities (Robinson et al. 2019).

Members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) community experience more mental health problems and suicidal ideation in veterinary school and as veterinary professionals (Witte et al. 2020). Globally the number of female veterinarians is increasing and this number has outpaced male veterinarians in many countries and regions, for instance 58% of all European veterinarians are female (FVE VETSURVEY 2018).

Yet client sexism (clients often demanding a male vet or insisting on a second opinion from 'one of the boys'.) is common. There is a lack of respect for female practitioners, especially following childbirth and/or working part-time (FVE VETSURVEY 2018). The gender pay gap is also reported in veterinary practice (Kersebohm et al. 2017). All factors call for the promotion of DEI practices to minimize stress among veterinarians.

DEI Practices in veterinary medicine would enable the sector to better serve a diverse population .

DEI practices enable better understanding of various diversities – age, gender, and socio-economic background – of livestock clientele

MEASURES TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSIVENESS/INCLUSION IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION

DEI practices in the veterinary profession have to be understood from various angles. Ensuring DEI at workplaces, such as veterinary educational and service institutions, will ensure fair treatment of all people. This will minimise biases, prejudices and stereotypes. Workplace aggression and conflicts would be reduced; and an improved sense of belonging will enhance workplace productivity and enrich client service delivery.



Migratory pastoralists often have poor access to proper veterinary care

In terms of service delivery, DEI practices can ensure that every animal and its owner receive equitable and fair treatment. Veterinarians are humans and therefore can have unconscious biases affecting decisions leading to disparities in animal care. Improved bias awareness through an understanding of diversity, equity and inclusiveness would help them mitigate the impact of these biases on their clinical/advisory decisions.

Box 2 throws some light on measures to promote DEI (Burkhard et al. 2022). For more read his article.

Box 2: Measures to promote DEI

I. Build a pipeline for diversity

- Implement pipeline programs, for example the vet up programme of Purdue University (<https://vet.purdue.edu/diversity/vetup/>);
- Offer volunteering opportunities for under-represented groups.

II. Create an inclusive campus environment

- Encourage affinity groups;
- Discuss micro-aggressions and safe spaces.

III. Redesign curricula for DEI

- Cover topics such as implicit bias and cultural differences;
- Build cultural competency and ethical understanding.

IV. Provide opportunities for diverse learning

- Work with community organizations and low-income individuals;
- Develop social awareness and civic responsibility.

V. Other measures

- Respect diversity and avoid hurtful remarks;
- Establish DEI committees and recruit diversity officers;
- Initiate community inclusion certificate programs.



Lecture on awareness about DEI Practices, organised by Veterinary and Animal Science Teachers Association, DGCN COVAS, Palampur, on World Veterinary Day, 2023.

EFFORTS BY VETERINARIANS OF HIMACHAL PRADESH ON THE SUBJECT OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSIVENESS IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION

Though awareness about DEI practices may be minimal among veterinarians, yet some of the veterinarians ensure that clinical and advisory services are inclusive. This means that based on nature of ownership, animals are not neglected. DGCN College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences celebrated World Veterinary Day 2023 with a lecture on Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness. It was organised by Veterinary and Animal Science Teachers Association (VASTA), Dr GC Negi College of Veterinary & Animal Sciences, Palampur. Some of the examples where ethnicity, difficult locations, and socio-economic background do not create barriers and disparities in animal care are mentioned below.

Some Examples of Inclusiveness in Veterinary Practice by Veterinarians in the State of Himachal Pradesh



Treatment of Pet Owned by Tibetan by Tashi Ihamo at Bir by Dr Sachin Sood



Treating cow of **Gojri Devi, Old Single woman** at Bharmour by Dr Atal Sharma



Equine castration by of Kartar Singh **Equine Owner** at remote location in Sirmour by Dr Amit Mahajan

Ensures animals are not neglected or mistreated because of their owner's background.



Treatment of Stray Dogs owned by Tibetan Monks at Bir Monastery by Dr Sachin Sood

Pix Courtesy:
 Dr Sachin Sood Vet Officer Bir
 Dr Atal Sharma Vet Officer Bharmour
 Dr Amit Mahajan (Through LinkedIn)
 Dr Rakesh Bhangalia AD Sheep Development Bharmour.



Dr Rakesh Bhangalia Senior Vet attending to animal outbreak of **Pastoralist** at remote high altitude pasturelands

Some noteworthy instances showing diversity, equity and inclusiveness in veterinary practice

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) have taken various steps to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the veterinary profession. Some of the common steps taken by both organizations are given in Box 3 along with Cannedy's (2016) steps to promote diversity in veterinary practice.

Box 3: Steps to improve DEI in the veterinary profession and veterinary practice

a) Veterinary Profession (AVMA and RCVS)

- Commissioned research to better understand barriers in the veterinary profession;
- Established training and resources to promote diversity and inclusion within the profession;
- Strengthened the codes of professional conduct to enable more confident reporting of poor behaviors and promote accountability;
- Developed materials, such as case studies, ambassadors, and career resources, for school-age children from all backgrounds to promote diversity in the profession;
- Provided financial assistance, such as scholarships, to help students from diverse backgrounds access veterinary education.

These steps are critical to creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive veterinary profession, which will benefit all – animals, pet owners, and the broader society.

b) Veterinary Practice (Cannedy 2016)

- Treat each client as they request to be treated;
- Get to know your clients and their families;
- Invite them to your practice;
- Celebrate their achievements;
- Communicate in their language when possible;
- Accept their invitations and gifts;
- Acknowledge their culture and show acceptance;
- Thank them for being your client.



DEI in veterinary practice calls for acknowledging the client's background and acceptance. Here, a Tibetan pet owner receives treatment at Veterinary Hospital, Bir, Himachal Pradesh, India.

CONCLUSION

The awareness of diversity, equity and inclusion practices is generally low in the veterinary profession. However, the thriving and modern veterinary profession needs increased openness and acceptance of DEI measures. Experiences of various businesses across the globe suggest that DEI practices bring more innovation, a sense of belonging, and improved productivity. Implementing DEI practices will ensure inclusion in veterinary institutions. Further, DEI practices would ensure animals are not

neglected based on ownership background. Various veterinary institutions and professional veterinary associations in the developed world are encouraging/adopting DEI practices.

It's time for DEI to become a part of the Veterinary Profession in India.

As Dr Niall Connel, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Senior Vice President and Chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Group, observes, *If we are losing colleagues to discrimination or just not attracting people from diverse backgrounds in the first place because they think it's 'not for people like them', then we are losing out as a profession, and if we aren't drawing on a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes in our work, then we are also potentially doing a disservice to our patients and clients. This is why this strategy is not just a case of being seen to be doing something, but is actually crucial for the ongoing vitality and credibility of the veterinary team.*

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