

VETERINARY LIBRARIAN: A RARE SPECIES

(Poster)

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Changes of the context of veterinary librarianship

Veterinary libraries, offering services to the whole animal health profession as well as to the general public, have usually been associated with veterinary schools of which there is only one in smaller countries. This means that veterinary libraries are bound not only to the academic institution, but also to veterinarians and their organisations, with unlimited responsibilities for gathering, organising and providing animal health information. In Hungary, the veterinary community is fairly small, about 4-5000 persons including professors of the faculty, researchers, state and private veterinarians, and even students.

The long established mission of the veterinary profession has been related to public health: to protect people from zoonotic diseases that could originate from food or live animals. In order to accomplish this mission, veterinarians have been working in a well-organised (semi military) hierarchical system, under state control, with pre-established channels of the information flow, following directives, etc. Veterinarians had a great influence in the field of animal breeding and food hygiene.

The only veterinary school used to belong under the Ministry of Agriculture like the animal health system, and was financed fairly according to the weight of the profession. Research was also concentrated around state-owned institutions.

So far practising veterinarians were concerned: they were employees in large farms or the state veterinary authorities, and could rely on their high-quality basic training, the centrally formulated directives, and a veterinary journal. They had good salaries, and high social reputation. It used to be an almost exclusively male profession.

Though the historic-political context has changed a lot, veterinarians had been working under fairly similar conditions since the 18th century until the privatisation of socialist cooperatives.

The 1990s have brought about dramatic changes in the veterinary profession, too. The privatisation of large, state owned farms and cooperatives as well as the loss of the eastern market of agricultural products has led to a drop in the number of large animals.

	1991	2000	2005
Cattle and products of cattle husbandry	87.3	67.3	59.8
Pig and products of pig husbandry	84.4	55.5	40.9
Sheep and products of sheep husbandry	90.0	35.8	39.1
Poultry and products of poultry husbandry	81.1	91.0	84.2
Other animals' husbandry	84.4	80.4	62.4
Live animals and animal products	84.4	67.9	58.0

Table I. Volume indices of production of agricultural products and intermediate consumption, 1990=100.0 (1991–)

(Source: http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/eng/xstadat/xstadat_annual/tab14_01_01iea.html)

As a consequence, the veterinary community was forced to change its profile. Less and less veterinarians have been working in the state administration and in the large farms. About two thirds of the vets have become private (self employed) practitioners. The hierarchy has loosened, and private vets are in charge of some state functions. Practices, formerly

prospering on treating large animals, struggle to survive on dogs, cats, parrots and exotic pets. However, pets – being pillars of the mental health of their owners – are supposed to receive treatments at a level approaching that of human medicine. Drug and feedstuff production and trade has also become private. Veterinarians, forced to become entrepreneurs, are now fighting for survival with poorer incomes, and declining social reputation. The overwhelming majority of graduates are women.

Meanwhile, the 1990s have seen a revival of professional organisations: the Chamber of Hungarian Veterinarians came into being, the National Veterinary Association was renewed, the friends of the veterinary school, historians, etc. have all formed their societies.

As competition grows, and as the practice is decentralized, the need for information, as well as the necessity to keep up with developments increases. Continuing education is not only a matter of practice management, but it is also required by the Chamber of Hungarian Veterinarians as a criterion for carrying on the practice. Veterinarians, working on their own or with few fellows, are responsible for their own information gathering and continuing further education.

In the mid 1990s, the supervision and maintenance of the veterinary university – as all other academic institutions – have been taken over by the Ministry of Education. In 2000 the University of Veterinary Science has become a relatively small faculty of a large university. The deterioration of the economic status of the faculty on the one hand, and the international reputation the Hungarian veterinary school on the other has made it necessary and possible to start English and German language programs for undergraduates. By now half of our students (ca. 500) are foreigners. Research institutions also struggle with the lack of funds. During the last few years the educational, the R+D sector, and libraries have experienced a decrease not only of their budget, but also of the funds that could be applied for.

The uneasy situation of the profession has been complicated further by joining the European Union: a very demanding process for state veterinarians, and partly for private practitioners. Veterinary drugs also require new dossiers to be accepted in the EU. The workload of all branches of the profession increased. IT skills are needed to perform basic professional duties (like registration of animals). The need for immediate information and distance services increases.

Changes in veterinary librarianship

To be the only veterinary library is a great responsibility and challenge. The mission of the library must be to guide veterinarians – from the first day of their training to the end of their professional life – in the field of information. It is also the mission of the library to safeguard the history of the profession.

Until 1948 the Hungarian veterinary library was managed by one of the professors of the veterinary school, and developed and used by his fellow professors. Present-day librarians are indebted to them for their fantastic donations laying the basis of our historic book collection.

After world war two, other professionals were in charge of the library, who bought books, catalogued and lent them to staff and students. Though there was a kind of information service already in the 1960s, it was mainly based on the abstracting service provided by the National Agricultural Library in Hungarian. The Hungarian Veterinary Bibliography was started (1973). This was a rather passive period.

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, professionalism was indispensable. The Hungarian library system has changed, and the veterinary library has become “a university library with national responsibilities”, and soon the only one collecting veterinary material. It got a separate building (instead of a few rooms). The historic book collection, the university

archives, and the veterinary museum were attached to it. The processing and publication of the historic material started. It enjoyed generous financial supply from the university (had no budget of its own). Computerized cataloguing, SDI service, and user education started. It was the time of turning the library from a passive, storing institution to an active information centre.

In the 1990s the situation of the library has also changed a lot. Librarians have already gained reputation at the university (participated in the senate). They had been responsible for measuring the scientific output of the academic and research staff by using bibliometric indices. However, the library also suffered from the budgetary restrictions. It started to work with its own budget, never enough for modern services (information technology, databases, networked services, not to speak about journal subscription). It was time to learn how to prepare applications for funds, and how to market services in order to find sponsors. In the 21st century the management of subscription consortium had to be learnt as well.

Information technology has become predominant in many ways: computers have become the main work tools, and also the focus of user education and individual tutoring (for both academic staff and students) was focusing on searching computerised databases. By the end of the 1990s the internet had already become important in providing services. The library started to build its homepage, and a textbook was written in library informatics.

However, applications made the processing of the university archives possible (which appeared in printed volumes), and the digitization of many books, journals and archive materials of historic significance. These are all put on the homepage of the library.

The years of 2000 the library's mission could be a bit rephrased: responsibility for disseminating veterinary information, and preparing veterinarians for lifelong learning and information gathering. It could also be called the proactive phase. Networked services: databases, expert systems, electronic journal collections, the library's portal, an online course in library informatics, etc. all serve the purpose of providing information as soon as possible in the most convenient packaging for scattered, overburdened users in and out of the university. More and more resources are brought to the desktop of users in the campus, and services go through e-mail, chat, file transfer protocol, etc. Larger and larger numbers participate in graduate and postgraduate training programs of library informatics, which is also available online.

The library is also a place where professional organisations may have their meetings, often inviting librarians to report on the developments of the information field. Conferences, photo exhibitions, talks, etc. are organised in the reading room.

The veterinary librarian: roles, knowledge and skills

Before 1948 the librarian used to be a professor, then, until the end of the 1970s people with no library qualification performed the basic tasks. The enrichment of the roles ("repertoire") of the veterinary librarians started in the late 1970s, when the partnership with the teaching staff had to be established. Strong professionalism both in the information field, and in historic research was required. At that time, students of veterinary science were allowed to write their thesis under the tutorship of librarians. The tradition of revealing and satisfying the needs of various groups of users started at that time as well.

When the historic book collection, the archive and the museum were attached to the library, the systematic processing and publishing of the material was started. Librarians had become the memory of the profession as historians, archivists. As technology developed, many of the sources (archive material, books, photos, etc.) were catalogued, published, digitized, and put on the internet. As a matter of fact, the libraries had to learn how to handle, preserve and digitize these old documents.

In the 1980s computers were introduced to our work, thus the process of acquiring more and more knowledge and skills in their use had started. It is an endless process. Now, most of our staff has the European Computer Driving Licence (gained as part of compulsory further training). We had to develop all sorts of skills in digitization, internet use, portal building, managing electronic sources, databases, servers, etc. Our library portal, its daily development is very important, thus several colleagues are engaged in this duty.

As more and more electronic databases and sources have become available, librarians started to be called “information specialists”. Database searching had to be mastered, and taught to more and more users. For many professors and vets we have become “personal advisers” in information matters, offering individual training at the library, or in their offices. Besides, new fields of study (pharmacology, diagnostic imaging, biotechnology, biomathematics, laboratory animal science, etc.) have to be incorporated into the librarians’ knowledge.

User education has also become more and more important first in classroom form, and more recently also online (a form convenient for veterinarians working in the countryside). The development of a printed textbook and that of online courseware was necessary. Training may also take the form of lectures or exhibition at veterinary conferences.

Bi(multi)lingualism is a must for veterinary librarians in Hungary, since both the materials, and the users require the knowledge of English and other languages.

Since the library had its own budget, it was forced to raise funds from applications, or through sponsorship from various organisations. Making applications, marketing services for firms (also as potential sponsors), maintaining good public relations with various organisations required new managerial and marketing skills, participation in professional organisations, and in policy making. With the integration of the faculty and the establishment of library consortia coordination also became very important. The head of the library had to become a full time manager, aided by a secretary and financial assistant.

The librarian is also been a bridge between the veterinary profession and humanities enhancing historic research, and publication (by editing, advice on publishing matters, spelling, referencing, etc.). The library is a natural place to turn to if veterinarians need such help.

Besides compulsory further training (embracing ECDL, Linux, digitization, management, making applications, etc.), in-house trainings are organised: emerging problems (new databases, technical developments, Open Access, visiting new libraries, etc.) of librarianship are discussed, and meetings are organised with researchers to get an insight into their work and information needs.

Conclusions

The veterinary librarian (information specialist) is not simply a professional. S/he is involved with her/his whole personality both in the topics which have to be dealt with (the love of animals if characteristic), and with the rather small community of users. Following the user from his/her first day at the veterinary school until they write their memories in retirement creates a special situation. Many of the veterinarians work in relative isolation, and demand much more from their library as other professions. Since still quite a number of services are not available for distance users, the librarian’s role as a mediator is also important.

This is further amplified if the library is the only one in the field: the “memory” and also the “future” of the profession being the sole source of information. For the past decades all libraries have experienced that their resources are not enough for providing the best possible service. The weight of the profession standing behind the library has a great impact

on how much the library gets from the scarce resources. As the number of farm animals decreased, veterinarians lost much of their influence in home economy, and the library cannot rely on their aid any more. On the contrary, the library has to contribute to increasing the level of the animal health profession with its own tools and resources.

For the past 30 years the Veterinary Science Library has made efforts (both with a future-oriented strategy and with services tailored to individual needs) to contribute to the training a new generation of veterinarians and animal health professionals who are competitive, well-informed, and prepared for life-long learning.