

# SCORING A CENTURY

# 100

From its beginnings in the post-World War I years to its experiences of COVID-19 and climate change, the NZVA has seen the veterinary world go through a significant transformation. As the organisation celebrates its centenary in 2023, *VetScript* brings you a (very) brief history of 100 years of New Zealand's veterinary profession.

cover story





# 1920s

When the New Zealand Veterinary Association was formed in 1923, the country was suffering from post-war economic uncertainty. However, farm production was flourishing thanks to new technology and improvements in pasture and stock.

The NZVA's 26 foundation members were led by president CJ Reakes, a veterinarian who was also director-general of the Department of Agriculture (formed in 1892).

According to *The Veterinary Club Movement in New Zealand* – a book written by Allan Grant in 1985 – prior to World War II, “Veterinary service to farmers came from the Department of Agriculture, a few private practitioners and some unqualified persons whose knowledge in some cases came from the tending of horse teams during the First World War.”

In 1926 – three years after the NZVA's establishment – the Veterinary Surgeons Act was passed, finally providing legal recognition of the country's veterinary profession. At the time there were 48 registered veterinary practitioners and 52 qualified veterinary surgeons, but no veterinary school for training (the Otago University Veterinary School had opened in 1904, but there were no enrolments and it closed

in 1907). Veterinary registration was restricted to graduates of British and Australian veterinary schools, and schools elsewhere that provided equivalent training, such as those in Pretoria and Ottawa.

During the 1920s veterinarians were likely preoccupied with cases such as calving, metabolic disease, facial eczema, lameness and colic in horses, and turnip poisoning.

Above: The first meeting of the New Zealand Veterinary Association in 1923, taken at Victoria University College (now Victoria University of Wellington) by an unknown photographer. CJ Reakes is in the front row, second from the right.

In 1920, Pearl Dawson became New Zealand's first female veterinary practitioner after obtaining a diploma in veterinary science through an American correspondence course.

# 1930s–40s

During and after World War II, New Zealand had a problem that we're familiar with today: a severe shortage of veterinarians. The country was experiencing a farming boom, but the war had interrupted the veterinary studies of those in Australia, the UK, Canada and elsewhere, and New Zealand still didn't have its own veterinary school. According to various sources, at the end of the war we had about 100 veterinarians, of whom many were in government service. There was only a handful working in clubs and private practice (mostly in the cities) and very few provided services to farmers.

Fortunately though, the veterinary club movement was about to become the catalyst for change.

Veterinary clubs had first made their appearance in the early 1900s (the Clutha Veterinary Association, established in 1907, is still a 'traditional' veterinary club today), but the

movement only started to gain traction in 1937, when

Allan Leslie became the club veterinarian of a veterinary group set up by the Federation of Taranaki Co-op Dairy Companies in Eltham. Many of the clubs in Northland, Taranaki, Waikato and Bay of

Plenty were dairy cooperatives, set up to service the dairy company's suppliers, while others were 'voluntary' clubs funded by farmers who paid annual subscriptions.

The New Zealand Veterinary Corps, formed in 1907, comprised qualified veterinarians, farriers, groomers, blacksmiths and more. It was active during both world wars and organised the procurement of horses for mounted units. During World War II, officers of the Corps served in Burma (now Myanmar), Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries.

According to Allan Grant's book, "There is little doubt the credit for [the veterinary club movement's] beginning must go to a rough, tough, 'loner' Scot, veterinarian Allan Leslie, who had the knack of persuasion and good rapport with the farming community."

In 1943 the Dominion Federation of Farmers Veterinary Services (DFFVS) was formed, with Leslie as its chief executive, and between 1943 and 1945 a 'recruitment drive' provided bursaries to 34 New Zealand students to train as

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veterinarians at The University of Sydney, and to overseas veterinarians recruited from the UK, Canada, the Netherlands and Denmark.

The Veterinary Services Act was passed in 1946, and a Veterinary Services Council (VSC) replaced the DFFVS. The VSC's function was "to promote and encourage the provision of efficient veterinary services for owners of livestock in New Zealand".



Top: The Bernard Chambers Building at Massey was the veterinary clinic during the 1960s. Above: This building served as the temporary veterinary laboratory

# 1950s–60s

Veterinary club practice continued to thrive during the 1950s and 1960s, and by 1955 there were 63 clubs employing a recorded 150 veterinarians. The VSC succeeded in making a clinical veterinary service available to almost all livestock owners nationwide, and in the early 1960s contract practice started to feature in veterinary clubs.

Selwyn Dobbinson, who worked as a veterinarian in Nelson and Otago in the 1960s, says the pace was frenetic. “Club veterinarians usually had large areas to service, with most roads being unsealed gravel,” he recalls. “The most common vehicle for rural vets was the VW Beetle, because with the back seat removed you could store large items such as gumboots, overalls, calf pullers, buckets and ropes.” He adds: “I preferred a Triumph Herald; it could easily do 100 miles per hour when required.”

During the 1950s the Wallaceville Animal Research Station (as it was then known) made major advances in both the control of parasitism and bacterial diseases such as brucellosis leptospirosis and mastitis and the understanding of the importance of trace elements, including cobalt and selenium.

These busy decades also saw the establishment of diagnostic stations at Taieri (1959), Whangārei (1967) and Lincoln (1968), and the evolution of drugs like calcium borogluconate and the benzimidazole family of worm drenches. Selwyn recalls that drug sales became a key part of practices’ financial viability. “I was told to sell as many drums of thiabendazole as possible. At £50 per drum, three drums paid for all the practice’s non-veterinary staff.”

## 1950S VETERINARY PHARMACY

Nux vomica, zingiber, plaster of Paris bandages, thermometers, pestle and mortar, calcium borogluconate, magnesium sulphate, Nembutal, ether, chloroform, iodine, zinc sulphate, M&B 693 (sulphadimidine), chloral hydrate.

The development of the drenches was a game-changer for the farming industry, as there were no properly working anthelmintics at the time. Veterinarian Hans Zuur recalled in his 2019 memoir, *Animal Patients and Their Owners*, that “many farmers are now too young to remember how devastating the damage caused by these internal parasites [could] be.”

Alan Alexander was first to graduate from Massey’s Veterinary School in April 1968

Zuur, who moved to New Zealand from Holland in the 1950s and spent 40 years as a veterinarian in Morrinsville, Whangamatā and Tauranga, also recalled dog dosing – the nationwide practice of regularly treating dogs at

‘dosing strips’ for hydatid disease (*Echinococcus granulosus*) caused by tapeworm. “Dosing day was a real circus,” he wrote. “All those different types of dogs, yapping their heads off, all those farmers in their different working clothes and headgear... and the two official ‘pill dosers’, trying to get that pill down the throat of each animal and to make themselves understood above all that noise.” Ultimately the strategy was successful, and New Zealand eradicated the disease in the late 1990s.

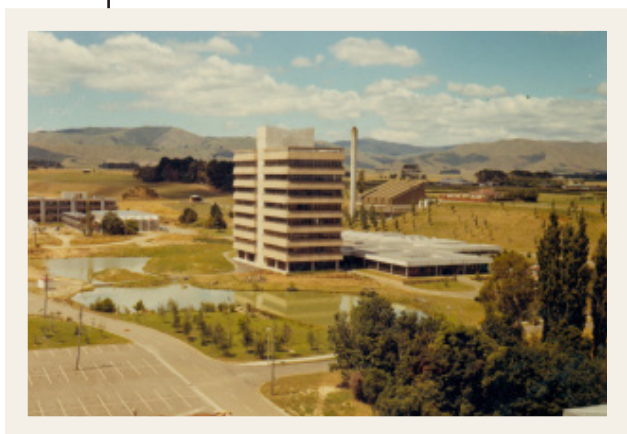
Immunology and vaccine development also advanced during these years, and the Strain 19 vaccine for *Brucella abortus* (now eradicated) was introduced in the mid-1960s. Selwyn remembers that before then, removing retained membranes from cows, often because of *Brucella abortus* but also from access to macrocarpa, was a common necessity. “Personal protective equipment wasn’t readily available and the full-length gloves were made from rubber that severely restricted mobility and finger sensitivity,” he says. This, along with a “macho ethic” that prevailed among the (nearly all male) veterinarians meant most membrane was removed with bare arms. “On one occasion, without wearing a glove, I removed 110 membranes in one day from a herd of cattle,” says Selwyn. “Most rural veterinarians in the ‘50s and ‘60s suffered at some time from bouts of recurrent, undulant fever [brucellosis].”

In 1964 the Massey School of Veterinary Science opened its doors, and Alan Alexander was among the 20 men and one woman in the first graduating class of ‘68. He remembers Massey as being very different from how it is today.

“The main veterinary school building had been approved and funded, but it wasn’t ready for us, so we were in temporary facilities,” says Alan. “Post-war buildings constructed for returning soldiers were converted into labs, and we had lectures in Wharerata Homestead, now the Massey Staff Club.” He can also recall all the teaching staff, of whom many came from overseas. “Professor Jolly taught veterinary pathology and our post-mortems were conducted outside by the furnace to burn the remains,” he says. “Dr Charleston taught parasitology and at one stage had to head off a revolt by the class, who felt that remembering all the individual parasite names was over the top.”







## 1970s–80s

Small animal medicine had started to evolve rapidly in the 1960s – including the development of exclusively small animal practices in large cities such as Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington – and by the 1970s and '80s rural practices were increasingly expanding their services to meet the needs of both farmers and companion animal owners.

With the introduction of open- and closed-circuit anaesthetic machines, surgical and medical skills in the companion animal field continued to improve, and orthopaedic surgical techniques were developed further. The first reported New Zealand cases of small animal diseases, such as canine parvovirus, feline leprosy and feline immunodeficiency virus, were also reported during these decades. In 1976, the first *Companion Animal Report* was produced by the NZVA, providing information on problems associated with domestic animals such as ponies, dogs, cats, guinea pigs and birds.

In the early 1970s, just 6% of the undergraduates at Massey Veterinary School were women (although this increased to 30% by 1980). Anne Haigh was one of the two women who graduated in the class of '69; she went on to work in a mixed animal practice in Nelson in 1970, and a companion animal practice in Hamilton a year later. "There were six or seven

veterinarians at the Hamilton practice, and I was the only woman," Anne recalls. "I didn't work with another female veterinarian until around 15 years later – and I was the only woman to make partner at the practice."

While she says she wasn't treated any differently from her male counterparts, Anne remembers some difficulty in getting jobs in those early years. "I applied for a job at a veterinary club, which I didn't get. I was told later that I'd been the preferred candidate, but they'd gone with someone else because I was a woman." She also says her boss in Nelson – the eminent Peter Malone, famous for establishing New Zealand's first 'flying vet' service – had to ask permission to employ her. "He went to the board to ask if it was okay to employ a woman," Anne says. "Luckily they said yes."

During these decades veterinary clubs began to foster preventive medicine and herd and flock health and production programmes, driven by a 1969 NZVA report encouraging a greater emphasis on investigatory and advisory work. Between December 1972 and June 1976 a Planned Animal Health and Production Service (PAHAPS) was trialled on 18 dairy farms in Waikato, with a focus on nutrition, reproduction, mastitis control, disease control and intensive farm

## TWO DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT

- 1970s: Part-time veterinary nursing course is set up at the Auckland Polytechnic (now Auckland University of Technology)
- 1971s: Tower Block at Massey Veterinary School opens
- 1972: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (previously the Department of Agriculture) is established
- 1973: Central Animal Reference Laboratory at Wallaceville is established
- 1977: NZVA head office moves to Wellington
- 1984: First after-hours service is established in Auckland
- 1986: First private veterinary diagnostic laboratory is established in Auckland
- 1987: The Veterinary Professional Insurance Society is formed

monitoring. The trial was a success, delivering an average 13% financial gain for every farm that participated. Early adopters of the PAHAPS model included the Bay of Islands Veterinary Service, which offered programmes such as mastitis control, calf rearing, whole-farm management and disease control to dairy farmers from as early as 1971, and the Rangitaiki Plains Dairy Company, which ran an intensive veterinary and agricultural service between 1973 and 1978. After the PAHAPS trial, many other schemes popped up around the country.

Of course we can't leave these decades without mentioning the first issue of *VetScript*, which was published in 1988. In its first year the magazine featured articles on an outbreak of enzootic bovine leukosis, the treatment of feline hyperthyroidism, the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and homeopathy.

Clockwise from top left: Surgical techniques advanced rapidly in the 1970s; an X-ray tomographic image of a sheep in the late 1980s; the decades saw the evolution of more specialist companion animal medicine; The Vet Tower and campus at Massey in 1974

## BY NUMBERS

# 830

the number of veterinarians in clinical practice in 1992



# 3,300

the number of veterinarians registered in New Zealand at the end of 2022



# 66%

the proportion of Massey veterinary graduates that were women in 1997



# 600+

the number of delegates who attended last year's NZVA conference



# 1990s– present



New Zealand's veterinary profession has continued to march forward in the past 30 years. Modern, custom-built clinics now have high-tech diagnostic equipment and in-house laboratories, specialist practices offer orthopaedic surgery, dermatology services and nutritional advice, and effective herd health management is the norm.

Much of the focus in the past 33 years, however, has been on the growing importance of animal welfare, biosecurity, One Health, antibiotic resistance and, more recently, the mitigation of climate change and its effects.

The 1990s and 2000s were big decades for policy and legislation. The Biosecurity Act 1993 was developed to prevent the introduction of disease and enable disease surveillance and management; the Veterinarians Act was passed in 1994 (and updated in 2005); VCNZ was established in 1994, replacing the NZVA as the organisation responsible for the Code of Professional Conduct; and the Animal Welfare Act was passed in 1999.

As attitudes towards animal welfare changed, the Animal Welfare Act was amended, first in 2010 to increase the penalties for animal cruelty, and again in 2015 when New Zealand became the first common-law country to include the word 'sentient' in its animal welfare legislation. The formation of Massey University's Veterinary Emergency Response Team was another key milestone; the team went on to have a crucial role in complex animal rescues and veterinary treatment after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

Global recognition of the spread of zoonotic diseases between species and the importance of the interface between human and animal health and ecological change led to the development of the



The early 1990s saw the introduction of the internet, allowing for video conferencing (top left) and online research (top right). Above: animal MRIs are now common practice.

One Health principle in the 2000s, and New Zealand's initiative, One Health Aotearoa, was formed in 2013. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic brought the importance of One Health into stark relief, while also emphasising the significance of biosecurity in protecting the country's borders. Veterinarians have had a vital role in addressing these issues – and will continue to do so.

As for the NZVA's celebrations, CEO Kevin Bryant says the organisation is looking forward to commemorating its remarkable milestone. "The New Zealand veterinary profession has overcome some significant challenges to make incredible progress in the past 100 years," he says. "As we head into our centenary year and look to the future, we're excited about celebrating the amazing achievements of those who came before us." <sup>vs</sup>

## NZVA CENTENARY ACTIVITIES IN 2023

**APRIL 24: World Veterinary Day**

**JUNE 28–31: 2023 NZVA Conference**

**JUNE 28: The NZVA's Centenary publication released**

**JUNE 29: Centenary dinner**

**OCTOBER 4: World Animal Day**

**TBC: Regional network meetings, social media campaign, TV coverage and centenary video**

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