

A *better* LIFE

By Anna Dunlop

Richard Wild has spent 30 years working to improve the welfare of New Zealand's animals.

The awareness of animal welfare and society's attitudes towards it, both in New Zealand and overseas, have changed dramatically since I began my career," says veterinarian Richard Wild. "I'm talking in terms of not only animal welfare legislation and standards, but also consumer awareness and expectations."

And he would know: last year Richard celebrated 30 years with the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) – three decades that had seen him on the front line of verification services (VS), as president of the NZVA and instrumental in developing animal welfare regulations that have improved the lives of the nation's pets and livestock.

Born in Wagga Wagga in inland New South Wales (NSW), Richard graduated with a BVSc from The University of Sydney in 1974. He went straight into mixed practice in Cooma, NSW, where he stayed for nearly eight years. "I enjoyed clinical practice,

but I got the seven-year itch," he says. "It was 1982 and I'd had the experience of working as the veterinarian on the set of the film *Phar Lap* [about the famous racehorse], parts of which were being shot just outside Cooma. It was stimulating work and it prompted me to look around for other opportunities that would take me away from mixed practice."

An advertisement for a role with the Federal Department of Primary Industries led to Richard working as a relief veterinarian at various export meat processing plants – including one in the coastal town of Byron Bay near the Queensland border. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," he says. "The meatworks was in an old whaling station right on the beach – I'd do eight hours of work and then go surfing." But as Richard freely admits, he couldn't have done that forever, so he moved on to the Federal Department of Primary Industries' office in

Canberra, working on animal health, animal welfare, trade and market access, food safety and biosecurity.

In 1993 Richard and his family moved again, this time across the ditch to Christchurch and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF, now MPI), where he's been ever since (his wife Stephanie is a born and bred Cantabrian). His first MAF role was as a VS veterinarian, working on the front line in the deer velvet and poultry industries, as well as other animal product industries in the Canterbury area. "At that time most of the deer velvet produced in New Zealand was being processed at around 30 factories in Christchurch, then exported to Asia," he says. "That was my introduction to verification work at MPI."

In 1998 MAF's Quality Management division was restructured and two state-owned enterprises were created: ASURE New Zealand (handling meat inspection) and AgriQuality





(focusing on livestock, horticulture and forestry). (The two combined in 2007 to form AsureQuality). Most of the veterinary component stayed within MPI, and the New Zealand Food Safety Verification Agency was formed (now MPI Verification Services). Richard managed verification services teams in various parts of the South Island until 2009, when he was asked to lead the VS animal welfare programme – a role he continues to hold today.

“We employ more than 200 veterinarians who monitor the welfare of around 26 million livestock sent for slaughter at export meat-processing plants as well as domestic abattoirs and poultry premises. We also monitor aquatic species and all live animals imported to and exported from New Zealand.”

During his early years at MAF, Richard and his colleagues, along with members of the meat and transport industries, started the Bobby Calf Working Group. “Several colleagues at various plants had identified major animal welfare issues with the transport of bobby calves,” he says.

As more organisations joined the group, it evolved to become the Farm to Processor Animal Welfare Forum, which now focuses on a broader range of animal welfare issues in all livestock. “There’s representation from 16 industry organisations, including the NZVA.”

Richard has been heavily involved with the NZVA throughout his career. In

the late 1990s, just a few years into his tenure at MPI, he was elected as the inaugural president of the newly named Food Safety and Biosecurity branch of the NZVA (previously known as the Meat branch) and served three consecutive terms.

In collaboration with his colleagues he also led the addition of an animal welfare component to form the Food Safety, Animal Welfare and Biosecurity special interest branch (now the Epidemiology, Food Safety, Animal Welfare and Biosecurity branch).

“The branch membership grew and grew, which was not surprising given the disciplines that it covered, and it gave us a lot more visibility within the profession,” he says. “Much of the work involved encouraging veterinarians to think more broadly about their options in the profession – it’s much more than clinical practice.”

Richard has long been an advocate for veterinarians working in animal welfare, biosecurity, food safety and government assurance, and is committed to promoting the role of government veterinarians. In the early 2000s, he spent a month overseas recruiting veterinarians for MPI. “I interviewed dozens of veterinarians in London, Harare and Johannesburg and whittled the number down to 20. The majority are still here, working in various roles for the organisation.”

Richard was also involved with the NZVA Board for 12 years, starting

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in 2004, and was NZVA president from 2008 to 2011, a time during which he oversaw a major organisational review. “Various special interest branches wanted to go their own ways and become separate organisations, so a lot of time and energy was put into making sure everyone stayed together,” he says. “Attending meetings with the UK, US, Canadian, Australian and South African veterinary associations exposed me to their different structures and operating models. They confirmed my belief that New Zealand was too small to have several voices speaking on behalf of veterinarians.”

He was still president when the Christchurch earthquake hit in February 2011. Many days in the aftermath were spent visiting badly affected veterinary clinics in the city’s eastern and western suburbs. “There was so much damage; at one practice the concrete floor of a new surgery had lifted

and broken in half.” He says the damage at Vets for Pets – the oldest veterinary clinic in Christchurch, housed in a wooden villa – was even more extensive. “The two-storey chimney collapsed into the waiting room. Luckily it was empty at the time.”

Richard recalls the NZVA meetings held to provide support and assistance to the affected veterinarians. “Part of that was sharing experiences of the impacts with colleagues. I will always remember one veterinarian telling us about being in the middle of surgery when the earthquake started – everyone else left the building but she stayed on to finish the operation.

“Those were very tough years for the people of Christchurch and Canterbury,” he adds. “Thirteen years later, and while there’s still more work to do on infrastructure, I think Christchurch is a vibrant and attractive city and becoming more so every year.”

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Richard has continued to manage the animal welfare programme for VS, working closely with veterinarians and other colleagues in MPI as well as the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, Federated Farmers, DairyNZ, SPCA

and of course the NZVA. During this time he’s seen improvements in attitudes to animal welfare and a significant increase in the awareness of standards, but he says there’s more work to be done. “We need to look at ways to recognise

sentience in animal welfare standards [animals were recognised as sentient in the 2015 amendment of the Animal Welfare Act] and acknowledge animals’ physical and mental states under the Five Domains model.”

With retirement looming, but not quite ready to hang up his boots, Richard has reduced his working hours to give himself time to focus on other interests. “I’m inspired by all the predator-free work going on around the country,” he says. “The changes in native bird life in areas where predators have

been controlled are great to see and hear, and I definitely want to make a contribution to New Zealand’s conservation efforts.”

Looking ahead, Richard believes the profession has an important role in contributing to the One Health approach. “How do we better align animal health, human health and environmental health and stop thinking of them as three separate things?” he says. “That’s definitely the next big challenge.” ^{VS}

