

# The 47<sup>th</sup> Henry Cohen History of Medicine Lecture

*'Animals and Medicine in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century'*  
Professor Abigail Woods, Historian

Held on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2019



Back row (l-r): Prof G Kemp, Mr S Ryan and Prof P Clegg  
Front row (l-r): Prof A Woods and Prof S Sheard

Before introducing Professor Woods, Professor Sally Sheard spoke about the life and work of Lord Cohen. He had given the first History of Medicine Lecture in 1972. Since then a succession of eminent speakers had been invited to give the annual lecture. Professor Sheard then introduced the latest in this line of such eminent speakers, Professor Abigail Woods. Professor Woods is a historian of science, technology and medicine. She trained in Cambridge and Manchester and spent eight years at Imperial College London before joining Kings College in 2013. Reflecting her earlier career as a veterinary surgeon, her research focuses on the history of animal health and the history of animals within human medicine. She is currently the Head of the Department of History at Kings College London where she leads on a large Wellcome Trust funded Collaborative Award.

Professor Woods' audience included students and professionals and academics from the medical and veterinary professions. Professor Woods began by saying she had had the opportunity of visiting the Liverpool Medical Institution when studying for her PhD in Manchester. One of the aims of her lecture was to challenge some of our preconceptions about the origins of veterinary practice in the late 18<sup>th</sup> through to late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In bringing us this new perspective Professor Woods would take us on a journey from establishment of the profession to evolution of a state system of veterinary practice. She would cover animals in medicine, medicine in animals, experimentation in animals from prosection and vivisection through to laboratory animals and also cover the area of zoonoses. These areas are continuing areas of consideration, debate and importance in the modern era.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a profoundly zoological era. Animals were much more central to people's lives. They were familiar, important and people experienced animal life, health and death much more directly. Lay people and lay practitioners were able to detect signs of ill health in their animals but lacked a systematic scientific approach. The rural population of agricultural workers was far greater than today. In addition a burgeoning middle-class as well as the upper class enjoyed country pursuits such as hunting shooting and fishing. There was a huge interest in natural history in the better

educated. And it was not just matter in the countryside. As people moved in to cities, so did their animals. This was beautifully illustrated by a painting of a traffic jam in Park Lane London at that time. No route master buses and taxis but instead oxen, horses, sheep and goats! Cows were also stabled in urban diaries. Here milk could be obtained straight from the udder in are clearly unadulterated way. Zoological gardens also were established in major cities

To address the lack of a structured, scientific approach the first Veterinary College in the United Kingdom was established in London in 1791. Its first Principal was a Frenchman, Charles Benoit Vial de St Bel. He had spent some time prior to this advocating for the establishment of such a College in the likelihood that he would be appointed its inaugural principle. The founders of the College were not a caucus of emerging dedicated veterinary practitioners but rather some of the most eminent medical men of their day. The first President was the Duke of Northumberland and medics such as George Baker (Physician to the King) and John Hunter exemplified the high status of the doctors and surgeons on the board. There was a feeling amongst the surgeons of that day that they were particularly suited to veterinary work. For example, John Hunter the foremost surgeon and surgical teacher of his day had a collection of 13,682 pathological specimens from over 500 species! A Medical Experimental Committee was established that morphed into the Examinations Committee awarding credentials to the new veterinary practitioners that graduated.

As a result the original house style of the new College was very much based on educational approaches established in medicine and surgery. Veterinary students were expected to attend lectures in medicine and vice versa. There was a sense of elitism from some of the medics: if they could provide care for the highest order animal: man, then there would be no difficulty being as adept in providing care for animals! The emerging veterinary profession felt otherwise and over the next 30 to 40 years fought for Independence, establishing the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in 1844.

Focusing now on animals in medicine Professor Woods turned to the Pathological Society of London. A medical entity it was established as part of a movement arising in hospitals in Paris, where post mortem and post surgery pathological samples were subjected to macroscopic and microscopic analysis. The hypothesis was that by better understanding disease processes, doctors could improve diagnosis and care for medical conditions. The Society was established in 1846 with 100 members reaching, 700 members by the 1880s. The index of all of their annual transactions included reports on "specimens from the lower animals". Professor Woods calculated that there were 230 such reports by 1881, about one in 20 of all reports. The greatest number were from farm animals, followed in descending order by zoo animals, pets, horses, animals from hunts, and lastly experimental animals.

These professional and amateur pathologists were deeply interested in the animals around them. Examples were given: One examined his own cat; another wondered whether a flock of doves adopting a strange extended neck posture prior to death had the dove equivalent of human diphtheria. Another examined the eyes of all animals dying at Regent Park Zoo. Specimens from two greyhounds with ricketts were also examined with input from vets who had encountered the disease in other animals.

Cattle plague (Rinderpest) when it occurred in cities was initially the preserve of medical practitioners in this case the medical officer of health. Doctors were also interested in the relationships between sheep pox, smallpox and cowpox. They investigated whether cows could spread diphtheria, scarlet fever and other diseases? Finding the cause of large number of grouse dying was of interest given the size of the shooting industry and its (medical) customers.

But it wasn't just about the direct benefit to animals and man; it was also about the development of points of comparison. An example would be the specimens of fractured bones from dogs in pathology museums, which could show patterns and principles of fracture and healing. It was also part of the era of home experimentation and entertainment, Victorian-style personal development, even the opportunity to acquire intellectual capital in your professional and social circles. Throughout this period, interested doctors and surgeons would need to liaise closely with those working with and associated with animals. It is to be noted that the vast part of this practice was in observational science not experimental science. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of specialist institutions and scientific disciplines established clear water between the science and practice of human and veterinary medicine, and career structures separated completely.

As we moved out of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> we moved increasingly into a less 'animalised' world. In the medical world there was increasing focus on a smaller number of animals that would increasingly be studied as experimental/laboratory animals identified as models for human systems and human diseases.

Now as we reappraise more than ever our interaction with the natural world, these observations by Professor Woods give us pause for thought about our relationship with animals and the interaction between us. The zoonoses we now face are different from those that worried people in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then they had the benefit of living in a profoundly zoological era.

This was a terrific lecture by Professor Woods that thoroughly engaged the audience and gave a great opportunity to reflect on the history of two professions and perhaps understand how many of us in medical practice were now so far removed from the world of animals. She had highlighted how the interaction of veterinary thinking and medical thinking had had profound benefits for both traditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following questions chaired by Professor Sally Sheard, a vote of thanks from the President of Liverpool Medical Institution Dr Steve Ryan, Professor Graham Kemp closed the proceedings with the University Dismissal.

Dr S Ryan