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A Message From the Dean

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In articles and letters discussing those components of our public health system deployed to contain the now all too real threat of bioterrorism, veterinary medicine is rarely mentioned. Yet veterinarians are positioned to contribute to the health and safety of human, as well as animal populations, in uniquely significant ways. Many of the pathogenic agents believed to be candidates for use by terrorists cause disease in animals and/or are carried by animals.

Veterinary epidemiologists study patterns of disease in animal populations to identify and monitor diseases potentially dangerous to man. In the case of West Nile virus infection, the discovery of dead birds first alerted authorities to the possibility of ensuing human infections and to the need for stringent mosquito control measures.

When, in 1993, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult released anthrax spores in a Tokyo building, there were no human deaths, but several pets succumbed to systemic anthrax, probably from licking their fur or other objects. In contrast to cattle, sheep, horses, and pigs, dogs and cats are not highly susceptible to anthrax. Nevertheless, these examples illustrate how affected animals, if diagnosed early, can serve as sentinels of disease, alerting physicians to the possibility of human infection.

In addition to those viral and bacterial agents of direct public health concern, veterinarians protect our health and welfare by surveillance, prevention, and control measures aimed at highly contagious diseases that threaten the nation’s livestock and poultry industries. The agents of foot and mouth disease, avian influenza, and swine fever, to name a few, if introduced into the United States, would severely damage America’s agricultural economy and consumer access to affordable supplies of milk, meat, eggs, and poultry. Large animal veterinary practitioners can thwart acts of agro-terrorism by rapidly communicating suspicious infectious disease patterns to appropriate state and federal diagnostic laboratories and agencies, and by imposing appropriate animal handling and quarantine measures.

We must ensure that the same lines of communication are readily accessible to veterinarians in companion animal practice.

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