CUSTOMARILY, every year, on the last Saturday of April, World Veterinary Day is celebrated to highlight the veterinary profession and its contribution to the society. However, the services rendered by this profession to society calls for its celebration everyday.

Let us understand how the veterinary profession has served mankind during the last two and a half centuries.

But first, who is a veterinarian or who can be a veterinarian? Well, anyone who loves and is passionate about animals, is ready to accept new challenges everyday, thinks animals are as important as human beings in nature, and above all, considers animals as living beings and not living things.

To be a part of the veterinary profession, one has to clear 10+2 with PCB combination, with more than 50% aggregate marks, followed by pre-veterinary entrance test. Then you join any of the forty odd veterinary colleges in India, undergo a basic course in veterinary science and animal husbandry for five years, come out with B.V.Sc & A.H. degree in hand, and remain a student lifelong. Because for a veterinarian, particularly the practicing one, there are many a surprises in store which spring up any time of the day or even night.

Today veterinarians are not merely those diagnosing and treating sick and injured animals but also those advocating animal welfare, and playing a crucial role in veterinary public health through supervising animal production, health and hygiene, controlling transmission of animal diseases to human beings (zoonoses), monitoring food quality and safety, participating in biomedical research and safeguarding the environment and biodiversity.

Claude Bourgelat, a French veterinarian, initiated the foundation of the world’s first veterinary school in Lyon, France in the year 1761, followed by another one near Paris in 1764. Setting up these institutes paved the way for veterinary science as a profession. In addition, Bourgelat suggested to surgeons in Lyon that studying animal biology and pathology would help to improve understanding of human biology and pathology. To mark the 250th anniversary of veterinary education, veterinary profession and the concept of comparative pathobiology, year 2011 is being celebrated as the World Veterinary Year, globally.

Traditionally, a veterinarian’s main concern is the health of an animal. Clinical veterinary practice could be at different levels—in individual animal, the farm, or taking care of national livestock population. A large number of the urban professionals are engaged in private practice, predominantly treating small
animals that not only include companion animals as dogs and cats but also birds, reptiles, rabbits, ferrets and other animals sometimes kept as pets. In addition, many of these veterinarians do go for a mixed practice that includes small animals and large animals as cattle and buffaloes.

Those who are practicing in the semi-urban or rural areas take care of farm livestock such as sheep, goat, cattle, buffaloes, pigs and poultry. These veterinarians make a significant contribution to animal production by assisting with the planning and development of flock and herd health programmes, and monitoring their health status and productivity parameters.

While in practice, many veterinarians attain specialization through higher studies, continuing education courses and/or by experience. There is a whole gamut of expertise available, be it veterinary ophthalmologist, or cardiologist or dermatologist or behaviorist. Today, in our country, some animal hospitals have the full range of techniques at par with any human hospital facilities. The technological advancements are no less than what we find in developed countries.

Veterinarians, through their clinical practice, play an important role in national disease control and eradication schemes, and look out for exotic diseases or pests that may be brought into the country. The profession even goes beyond the treatment aspect and provides measures for upkeep, care and management of the livestock, whether at farm or home. Monitoring and managing animal welfare standards are also their forte.

Veterinary expertise is not just confined to the domestic or in-captive animals but is critical for the disease control, translocation and reproduction success of free-living wild animals and birds as well, since they are always under threat.

Yet another domain where veterinarians show their might is research and technical services. From the portals of higher education institutes, veterinarians are contributing to all aspects of animal research. The laboratories in turn also provide diagnostic support to the practitioners by testing various samples for microbiology, parasitology, pathology and biochemistry.

Veterinarians are also employed by production houses of veterinary pharmaceuticals, feedstuffs, vaccines and the like as technologists, researchers, scientists, and managers.

Protection of the fragile environment is also where a veterinarian plays a key role. Their wide range of expertise enables them to contribute effectively in balancing the depleting natural resources, increasing human population putting more and more pressure, and production of food for both human and animal use, and thereby in the conservation and preservation of our environment.

Veterinarians have a crucial part to play when it comes to animal-origin food, and that too at every step of the production, and then be it from farm to fork, pasture to plate or stable to table. With every outbreak, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or Mad Cow disease followed by bird flu, the safety concerns towards animal-origin food has been attaining greater heights. To ensure that food is safe, veterinarians maintain quality control and hygiene thereby reducing the perils of food-borne illness to consumers.

Many of the transmissible diseases are controlled through quarantine by veterinarians who not only take care of food safety but also bio-security. This can only be ensured by maintaining high standards of sanitation and hygiene, regular and stringent inspection and enforcing governmental regulations.

The veterinary profession is one of its kind, for it not only touches the lives of animals but of human beings and nature, too. A multi-dimensional profession, in the true sense! Let us all join in celebrating the 250th anniversary of veterinary education, veterinary profession and the concept of comparative pathobiology.

And so goes the punch line… Vet for Health, Vet for Food and Vet for the Planet..........