

Second submission to LegCo on Cap 529-26th January, 2015

## ***Background***

Veterinary medicine is a medical profession. It is recognized under the Basic Law's Article 142 and 148 on professional autonomy, and for a reason. Veterinarians safeguard the health and medical needs of pets, horses and farm animals; and also the public health, food safety and animal welfare in Hong Kong. It is the Veterinary Surgeons Board(VSB) that oversees that these veterinarians perform to their standard. It is the VSB that ensure those registering to work in Hong Kong, for Hong Kong pets and clients, are to exercise their internationally acceptable professional standards. The VSB ensures veterinarians who fall below the standard are charged and given appropriate sentences. VSB is the gatekeeper who advice against any sub-standard veterinarians or education program who and which should not be registering in Hong Kong. For the past 17 years, VSB has been functioning optimally and minimally at 2:1 veterinarian to non-veterinarian ratio, and not any ratio less. About 7 years ago, the VSB has been honest and wish to expand the Board size in face of the growing and maturing profession while maintaining what has been functional 2:1 ratio of veterinarian to lay person.

## ***On importance of maintaining 2:1 ratio***

In response anyone who does not understand why the 2:1 veterinarian: lay person ratio is significant to the Board and insists on anything less than 2:1, the person is misinformed, unfortunately only believes in here-say there-say, and is putting the public at risk.

Firstly, if one thinks 1:1 or any less ratio, so that there is more lay person on the Board proportion, it will render the Board as a non-professional Board that is pretending to understand the intensely technical issues of veterinary medicine. If one reviews carefully the distribution of complaint cases in the recent 5 years, at least 66% are medical, diagnostic and surgical in nature. These are areas that a lay person will not be able to identify or pass medical judgement. Under such circumstance, a lay person will have to rely on the interpretation of their fellow VSB veterinarian, in which, if allowed to

be set at 1:1, will only be a limited number of veterinarians. With this, there will be no healthy professional discussion or medical vigor to safeguard the cases. Thus, the complainant of the case will suffer from fact that more seats are taken up by lay persons, who are unable to thoroughly investigate and judge the case. Secondly, a lay person will have to rely on his or her emotion and here-say there-say to judge cases. This is not professional judgement. To reiterate, this will render the case to dangerous oversight because the majority of complaint cases in recent 5 years are in the area of veterinary medicine, diagnostics and surgery. It will be unjust to the public and threaten the animals' well-being, to allow these complaints to be judged by lay persons, who will overlook, miss and misinterpret the medical cases. Any ratio less than 2:1 is a devastating proposal. The damage to the Board, the animals' welfare and well-being and veterinary medical standard in Hong Kong will be unprecedented.

### ***On public perception of over-charging***

On second point to support sufficient 2:1 veterinarian representation is actually on public interpretation of over-charging. If one perceives Hong Kong to be an international city, then let us compare its veterinary charges to its peers. To quote some international figures, a London and a Sydney clinic would charge HK\$500 & \$650 respectively for consultation. This is above the general average consultation charges in Hong Kong (Between \$200-300 average for a general consultation). This of course can be argued that there is different city expenses and tax and such. But in face of Hong Kong's rent and overhead as one of the highest globally, Hong Kong veterinary charge can still be one of the lowest among its peers. Since the profession is relatively young in this city, there is still little understanding that why pet medicine bill should be equivalent to private human medical practice. For one, a smaller body size in cats and dogs do not mean the medicine is of lesser quality. It is truly a public maturation process to understand pet veterinary medicine is for their family member-the cat or the dog. Secondly, the complication of not understanding why certain test and procedure is done means public will see that their money spent is not worth-while. This is a matter of communication, the

veterinarian and the owner both has the responsibility of enquiring as well as listing the price of services, the implication of these test and procedure and why they should be done. If this communication is unsuccessful, or insufficient on the veterinarian's behalf, or if the public has legitimate evidence that there is over-service and the veterinarian has not explained himself/herself, then one should bring the case to the Board. Public needs a statutory body who knows the veterinary details to protect them. Public needs a robust, professional veterinary body to guard for the animal and client's right. It is the responsibility of the Board.

On that note, pricing is always a publicly emotional topic. Since the profession is still young in Hong Kong, without the history such as UK, Australia and North America, there is still lack of in-depth public understanding of veterinary medicine. There is still a lot of mis-interpretation of the profession. I hope to clear a few points here. When a wise and observant individual walks into the veterinary clinic, which is usually on the ground floor for animal access, one can start adding up costs of exorbitant Hong Kong rent, purchase and maintenance of in-house blood test machines, ultrasound machine, x-ray machine, hospital setup, and surgery theater, which includes anesthetic and oxygen supply, as well as veterinary assistance and training. All in all, veterinary clinic is a self-sufficient consult facility, imaging facility, hospital facility and surgery facility, with veterinarians bearing all the costs. Comparing to land granted at \$1 or \$2 to human hospitals, veterinary medicine do not have that provision. If one put the charges in example, an average clinic rent will take up 50% of the consult fees per day if the vet works 30 days a month. For the rest of the day, the consult fees goes into staff salary, leasing of ultrasound and x-ray machine, or running of the blood machine. Hence, veterinary medicine by nature can be a high-charging profession, however, after deducting all costs, a low-earning profession. Alike human medicine, free universal coverage for pet medicine would be ideal. However, in reality, until resources can be unlimited, one has to be able to balance costs of proper medicine. Hence, law-makers who is proposing 1:1 ratio, or less than that, or trying to add lay person to solve the cost problem is not on the point. The opinion is certainly biased, manipulative and

deceptive to the public, fellow LegCo members and the Administration. In essence, if the problem is on charges, logic of price and transparency of charges, the problem can only be resolved by having a strong, professional and objective Board who knows how to look for and pick up on over-charging, usually on written submission by complainant. Quite opposite, if there are plenty of lay persons, one will have to rely on emotion and common sense on charges, which in the face of hearing, will not stand in the case, causing wastage of tax-payer's money. All in all, using charges as an argument is to use public emotion to coerce decision makers into poor judgement. Setting sensible guidelines on code of conducts of charges and way to go about enforcing it, is the key to solving the problem. To do that, only a professional, objective Board can do that. There is never a more important time to recruit **high caliber, high quality and enough number of veterinarians** into the Board, not reducing their representation.

### ***Professional implication***

In addition, for this Bill amendment, the Legislative Council's action is under scrutiny by all medical professions, all professions' eyes are on whether the Legislative Council is to protect professional autonomy and public interests and find its balance. The balance has been practiced and refined for 17 years. The balance is at 2:1 ratio of veterinarian to non-veterinarian. The Amendment is asking for a template to be expanded, from 9 seats to 18 seats, without changing the ratio of veterinarian to lay person. A VSB cannot be a professional self-regulatory body if there is insufficient veterinarian representation. 2:1 is already a humble ratio by international standard. By reducing the ratio from 2:1 to 1:1, the proposal will render the Board a non-professional, hypocritical entity pretending to safeguard the public's health, animal's welfare, and veterinary medical standard in Hong Kong. If 1:1 ratio is allowed, it will also be the Legislative Council members who condoles misinformation and biases, to say that veterinarians are not to be trusted and cannot self regulate. Therefore, it is even more important to uphold the professional standard of the Board, by having excellent QUALITY and QUANTITY of veterinarians on the Board, so that the Board can do its job, to ensure the practicing veterinarians are up to

standard. It is not by reducing the ratio and representation of veterinarians who fight for the public's interest.

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