



**Sophie Beckwith** Freelance Journalist|RVN

Having worked in the UK veterinary industry for nearly 20 years, Sophie now combines her time between registered veterinary nursing and freelance journalism. Nursing representative for the Animal Welfare Foundation and lead nurse on an annual neutering programme for stray cats in Greece, Sophie is committed to good animal welfare. She is communications manager for the charity Wild Welfare and writes and blogs about animals, nature and the environment.

# The Animal Welfare Foundation and the RVN's role in welfare

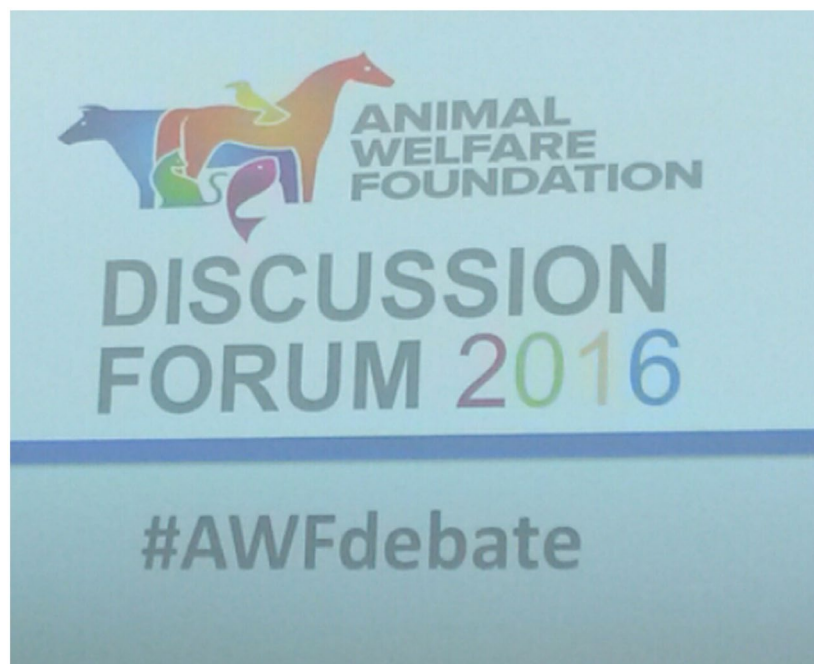
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The clue really is in the name. The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) is a veterinary-led charity and its vision is to advance animal welfare by using veterinary knowledge to help animals have a better life, relieved of pain and suffering. As veterinary nursing representative for the AWF, one of my roles is to engage more nurses with the charity's work, highlight why it needs nursing support, inform nurses about the resources it has available to help them and their veterinary colleagues in practice, and encourage individuals to get more involved with its ongoing mission to improve animal welfare.

Veterinary nurses have animal welfare in their blood, whether it is there from birth or is nurtured as we train and then qualify as proud RVNs – spending day after tiring day with animals and for the love of animals – it is there and it runs thick. Despite this, and I speak as someone who has been nursing for nearly 20 years, it never hurts to have a reminder now and then about

what more we can do. That is what AWF does. It is only a relatively small charity, but one that gives you a good nudge. It reminds you where your focus should be concerning animal welfare and empowers and enables you to get involved and to do your bit to instigate progressive change.

Every year the organisation goes from strength to strength, tackling ongoing and emerging animal welfare issues head-on. It funds research, generates debate and is constantly looking at new ways of improving some of the key welfare concerns faced by the UK's animals. Their annual Discussion Forum is a real highlight in the animal welfare calendar and attracts veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, welfare organisations and government representatives alike. Key issues are put up for debate, with multiple speakers presenting the differing sides of each featured subject. The floor is then thrown open to the audience to ask questions, offer opinion and really get the conversation going.



**Figure 1.** The AWF Discussion Forum's a highlight in the animal welfare calendar



Figure 2. The Forum's welfare debate continues at an evening reception in Westminster's House of Commons

There was a wide-ranging programme of animal matters up for discussion this year, from the legislation and owner education needed to improve welfare for non-traditional companion animals (or exotics) to farming and how it can compromise the welfare of livestock. The Animal Welfare Acts were reviewed and their successes and failures challenged and disputed by key speakers, including David Bowles, the RSPCA's assistant director of public affairs, and Mike Radford, reader in animal welfare law at Aberdeen University and a familiar face from television – he featured on BBC Panorama's *Puppy Dealers* earlier this year.

For the third year running the BVNA and AWF co-hosted a competition to give two nurses a free place at the popular Forum and the House of Commons reception that follows, where lively debate continues over drinks and attendees get the opportunity to meet influential MPs and encourage them to speak loudly for animals in parliament. Katharine Ross, a student RVN from Edinburgh who currently works at Vets4Pets in Straiton, and Lauren Valentine, a London-based RVN who nurses at the RVC's first-opinion site in Camden, were inspired and impressed by the event this year, as well as shocked at some of the content.

Mrs Ross said she had been struck by some of the statistics from the PDSA's 2015 PAW Report. Sheila Voas, Scotland's chief veterinary officer, mentioned the report in

her presentation on exotics as she talked about the wider issue of owner awareness of an animal's needs. Commenting on one of the report's facts that more than 2.7 million dogs in the UK do not get daily off-lead exercise, Mrs Ross said: "Humans aren't doing much exercise nowadays, maybe, sadly, they just don't realise how much exercise their pet needs."

The exotics presentation then went on to hear from Libby Anderson, policy advisor of the animal protection charity OneKind. Attendees saw disturbing images of species in extremely poor welfare conditions where they were being intensively bred to supply the pet trade. The audience learnt that abandonments of exotic species are on the increase and in Scotland some of the animals found have included a four-foot long anaconda and five bearded dragons who were dumped in bin bags – three survived and two did not in what the RSPCA called one of the worst cases they had ever seen. Miss Valentine sees a lot of husbandry issues in exotic patients within her current practice role and is constantly looking for ways to encourage positive changes in the name of animal welfare. "It doesn't matter what change you're making as long as you're making one", she said.

This year nurses were asked to describe three things they would do in practice to improve the welfare of their patients. Educating owners and a welfare-based approach to veterinary nurse education were key themes, and certainly while speaking to both nurses at the House of Commons reception, I was struck by their joint passion for having more animal welfare training in veterinary nursing programmes. The AWF had already looked at this as an area of focus and as an

organisation it has been able to integrate animal welfare teaching into UK veterinary school curriculums and already sends speakers to the veterinary universities. Now, in the 2016/2017 academic year it has extended this and begins welfare talks for veterinary nursing students.

More exciting news for nurses wanting to take a leading position in the field of animal welfare is that AWF is growing the reach of its research grants. Over one million pounds has already funded vital veterinary research, but previously horses, cattle and sheep were the main benefactors as the AWF's Norman Hayward Fund was restricted to these species. Now grants are available for projects that include any species and students studying veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing and agricultural students, who will have completed 2 years of study by the start of a project, are all invited to apply before a 4 November deadline. The grant will cover the project's costs and a stipend equivalent to the national minimum wage will be paid to the student undertaking the research. So, if you have a great research idea with potential positive impacts for animal welfare, then take a look at the AWF website for full details and start applying.

At the same time as funding essential research that has a practical and often legislative influence on pertinent animal welfare issues and adding to a varied range of pet care leaflets for use in practice, the AWF has been supporting an initiative called The Links Project. At 2013's Discussion Forum, Dr Freda Scott-Park from The Links Group presented a debate about the vet's role in recognising the connection between human and animal abuse. Following the debate, an anonymous donor pledged support for the work and The Margaret Giffen Charitable

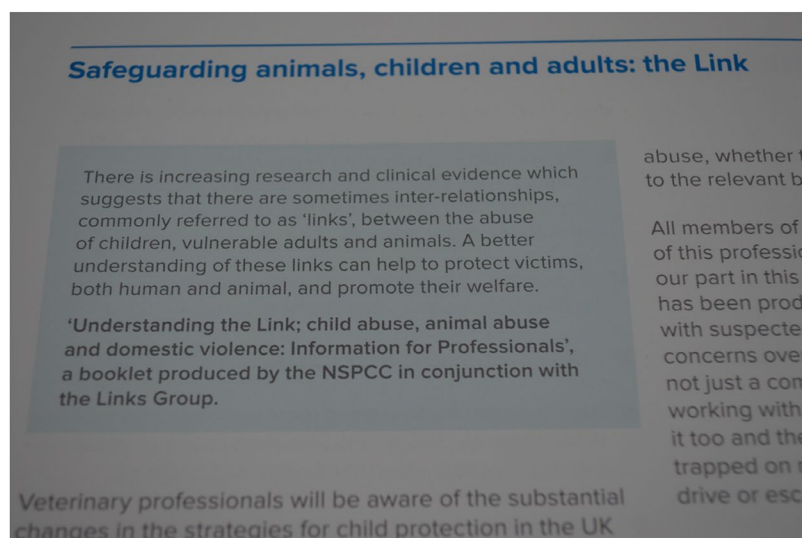


Figure 3. The Links Group highlights the link between human and animal abuse



Figure 4. AWF nursing representative Jill Macdonald with competition winner Katharine Ross at the House of Commons reception

Trust offered substantial funding through the AWF. That was the first year I attended the Forum and the painful and frightening statistics I listened to then were remembered again this year. That more than 80% of domestic violence victims are women and that a woman may be the victim of an assault 35 times before contacting the police.

Where humans are at risk of violence, animals are too, and The Links Group, with the support of AWF, launched vital educational material at this year's BSAVA congress, helping the veterinary profession to spot those risks. The training document entitled "Recognising abuse in animals and humans" gives thorough guidance to veterinary professionals on how to identify non-accidental injuries (NAIs) in pets, how to take the correct action and how to work in the best interests of veterinary patients and their owners. It is being distributed by the RCVS to UK veterinary surgeons and registered veterinary nurses and additional training which all members of the practice are encouraged to take up will help to inform and educate on the subject and introduce practice staff to domestic abuse police units and welfare organisations. The Links Group has also been able to develop an online resource for human healthcare professionals, giving them basic animal welfare training, enabling them to assess human and non-human family member well-being and encouraging cross-agency communication to secure welfare protection for animals and humans alike.

The role of veterinary nurses in educating owners and envisioning this as a key method for instigating positive animal welfare change is not anything new. Fellow

nursing representative Jill Macdonald highlighted the subject in her *VNJ* piece in October last year, and it is a recurring theme when nurses are questioned about their role as day-to-day welfare influencers, so the ongoing work by AWF on its Puppy Contract is welcome news to nurses in practice. The Puppy Contract was developed by the AWF and the RSPCA to help new puppy owners avoid the potential problems that can occur if a puppy is bought from an irresponsible seller or breeder. You could say that the document has never been more vital than today, with the online sale of puppies still developing at an alarming rate and significant welfare issues around poor breeding practices continuing to be exposed.

The Contract is for a breeder or seller of a puppy to complete before selling, giving comprehensive information on the health checks and treatments a puppy has had in its first eight weeks, as well as how it has been socialised and its parentage. It contains guidance notes for the buyer on what this information means and allows them to make an informed decision before buying a puppy, be it a pedigree or crossbreed. The "Contract", signed by both breeder and buyer, clarifies their equal responsibilities to the welfare of the puppy and has legal force. The Puppy Contract shows consideration of a puppy's welfare on the part of the breeder and allows prospective owners to make an informed decision before buying a puppy, helping to prevent health and welfare issues further down the line as a result of poor care or poor breeding.

When veterinary nurses register with the RCVS, in exchange for the right to be a

practising RVN in the UK, we make a declaration:

"I promise and solemnly declare that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, above all, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care."

The AWF continues to push forward in its recognition for the issues surrounding the welfare of animals and its steady, streamlined mission promises to use veterinary knowledge to improve that welfare through science, education and debate. In essence, AWF is a lot like a veterinary nurse, gently insisting for better welfare, ever trying new ways to open the discussion on animals and their essential welfare needs. Pulsing animal welfare through its blood and holding it at its very core.

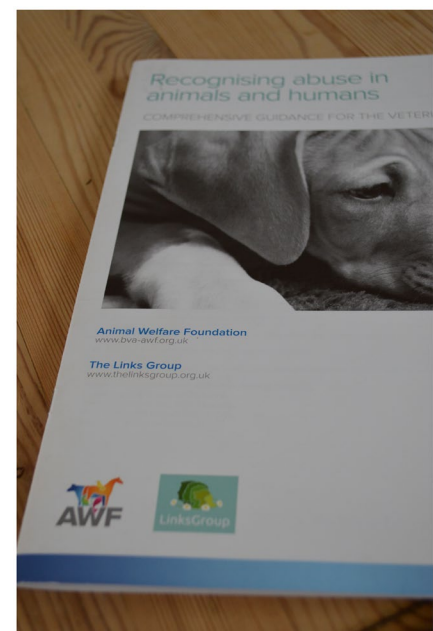


Figure 5. The Links Group's 'Recognising abuse in animals and humans', launched with support from AWF

To find out more, visit the AWF website, and for the initiatives mentioned:

- Visit the AWF YouTube page or access the link via their website [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk) for all the 2016 debates
- For more on the Links Project visit [www.thelinksgroup.org.uk](http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk)
- To download a copy of the Puppy Contract or place a link on your practice's website, visit [www.puppycontract.rspca.org.uk](http://www.puppycontract.rspca.org.uk)
- To access any of the AWF's client information leaflets visit [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)