

**Head of Afghan Veterinary Association learns from AVMA**  
Visit strengthens ties between organizations



Scott Nolan

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—DR. SAID GUL SAFI, PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
AFGHAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATION

For nearly three weeks in April, the AVMA hosted Dr. Said Gul Safi, president and CEO of the Afghan Veterinary Association. It was an educational tour for the head of the relatively young association, who plans on incorporating much of what he learned into AVA operations.

Dr. Safi visited with AVMA division directors and staff to learn about association management. He traveled to Washington, D.C., for meetings with the AVMA Governmental Relations Division and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, and to Maine for talks with the state veterinary association and visits with the state veterinarian and Idexx Laboratories, Inc. He also toured dairy and poultry farms as well as companion animal practices, and he participated in a veterinary management meeting in Connecticut.

Now Dr. Safi plans on taking the AVA in several new directions, including reaching out to Afghan veterinary students, building closer ties with the country's universities, and stepping up the association's communications with its members.

The trip was made possible by funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development and was coordinated through the Department of Agriculture.

The AVMA has had a relationship with the Afghan organization since 2004 when Association representatives attended the International Veterinary Conference in Kuwait City. Dr. Safi has attended two AVMA Annual Conventions since then. Dr. Beth Sabin, an assistant director of the AVMA Education and Research Division, was present for the first National Convention of the AVA in Kabul in 2007.

Earlier this year, Dr. Safi was granted associate membership in the AVMA.

"The value to AVMA of having Dr. Safi visit was expanding our knowledge of veterinary medicine and veterinary associations in a different part of the world," Dr. Sabin said. "Building and strengthening relationships with colleagues from other national veterinary associations will be key to strengthening the AVMA's international stature and promoting professional unity to advance animal and human health."

Before returning home, Dr. Safi spoke to *JAVMA* News about what he learned and some of the differences between veterinary medicine in Afghanistan and in the United States.

### **What was the primary reason for your visit?**

The main reason was to find out more about the structure of an organization like the AVMA, and to learn more details about the job carried out here. Our organization is new, and we want to improve it, so we need to know how we can improve and what are the important things to be considered. The AVMA is one of the oldest veterinary organizations in the world, and there is much to learn from them.

### **What did you learn in your time here?**

I have visited all the (AVMA) divisions, spending time with them trying to understand what they do. These are all the things we need to be doing. The two organizations want to help their membership and to help their profession. To achieve these goals, we will need to create our own divisions and organizational structure to get established. It was very useful spending time with them and learning the details of their work.

### **Is there anything you want to take back to your own association?**

Absolutely. First of all, I learned we need to do more. We have to do a lot to our organization. When compared with AVMA and the Maine VMA, the AVA is in the early stages. We are similar in some things, but certainly we are not able to do all that you can do. First of all, we don't have such strong financial support. Then there are some other areas that we are in the process of improving, like communications with the members. Technically, we have problems in that area; our system is not the same as you have here—our e-mail capacity is less than yours, for instance. Plus, many of our members are out in the field and difficult to reach.

Some of the other areas, like research, we don't have any such initiatives because the country just recovered from 30 years of war. We're just starting to normalize things. It will be a long wait for us to go into research. Another thing we are interested in now is working with the students, who we're not very close to. Another new area is animal welfare, which we have not addressed. And the close contact with the universities. We don't have veterinary colleges, but still, we have universities, and I think we need to work with them more.

### **What continuing education opportunities are there for Afghan veterinarians?**

From time to time, veterinarians come together in conferences to talk about what diseases they've seen, types of procedures they're doing, and the results they're getting. This sharing is definitely helpful. We do this at our convention, but we do it very differently (than in the U.S.). For example, when we have a convention, we don't have time to go to specific classes; we just offer a class on, say, diseases of the horse. We throw a question to the whole room of 250 people, and they will say what they've seen and how they treated it. And then, those people who haven't seen these cases, they learn. This is the type of technical, professional interaction to benefit their daily work and improve their service delivery.

### **Are there other differences in the ways veterinary medicine is practiced in Afghanistan?**

We are 100 percent focused on small and large ruminants and equines; no pigs and small animals. There is, however, an increasing interest in small animal medicine, mainly in Kabul, where most expatriate workers live. Large animal work requires field trips out of the clinic. We call them veterinary field units. Another important difference: due to the lack of roads and transportation, people cannot bring their animals to the clinic. The vets have to go out to them. And they deal with large flocks of 100, 500, or 5,000, so veterinarians go to them and do the vaccination or deworming. Most of the veterinarian's time is spent out of the clinic. But here, people spend most of their time in the hospital.

Our main focus in Afghanistan is mostly on preventive measures, meaning we're more focused on vaccination against certain infectious diseases that cause high mortality. We focus on deworming and other activities like treating wounds and skin disease. There are equipment differences, too. Equipment is available here (in the U.S.) for small animals, but we don't have it in Afghanistan. But we do have essential tools required for the type of job we expect.

### **What sorts of services does the AVA provide?**

The main agenda of the association is to defend the rights of veterinarians and support them in the delivery of animal health services to the countryside. We try to establish in each district a veterinary clinic, then hire the people. We train them, we assign them, and we keep training them and supplying them. The goal is that we not only support the members to help them do a better job, but it's also helping the entire nation by growing the economy by increasing people's livelihoods, because so many people depend on their livestock. It's crucial for them that someone looks after the animal population and keeps them healthy.

We just reached an agreement with the government to recognize some types of divisions within the animal health delivery system. Under the system that we have established for the members, we call them private practitioners. This year, 120 government veterinary clinics will be moved to the private sector. The remaining ones—about 35—will be

moved some time later. Privatization of veterinary services is a fairly new concept in Afghanistan, and the AVA is supporting this new direction. We agreed with the government that government should not provide these direct types of services to the community that the practitioners do. The government should be focusing on food safety, quarantine, transboundary disease control, care of public concern disease—OIE-listed diseases, that is—major research, and diagnostic work.

**What are your responsibilities as AVA president?**

We have a board of 21 people. We have seven regional associations, and each association has three elected representatives. And the 21 will elect one of their numbers as president. We only have a president, not a vice president or CEO. The AVA has projects that we implement for members throughout the country. It's a huge network that requires a coordinator—the president. Then we also have managers for different projects, and so I am also the president for all coordinators.

**What are your hopes for this relationship with the AVMA? How do you want to see it continue?**

We are a very young association, and we have a lot to learn from the AVMA. The AVMA is in a position that they want to help us, and that helps both sides—we share what we are doing, and they share what they are doing. Of course, we learn more because (the AVMA) is more experienced, and it helps us to build our organization stronger and stronger. We are in different parts of the world, and if we keep continuous contact, it helps us as an organization to know what's going on in the rest of the world.