From its inception in 1862, the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) has demonstrated a strong sense of service to its community as articulated in its motto: Opus Veterinum Civibus—The Craft of the Veterinarian is for the Good of the Nation.

Today, as we understand the many benefits accrued from the relationship between humans and animals, we must also acknowledge that we operate in an environment fraught with social inequity. Increasingly, many Canadians struggle to access basic health care for both themselves and the animals they care for. As OVC pursues its vision to enable and champion social accountability in veterinary medicine, we ask ourselves: are we serving the nation as we should or are we serving only that part of the nation favoured with wealth and privilege?

As gatekeepers of our profession, veterinary schools must reflect deeply on their place in society and how they can address the social and economic challenges that have been further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In committing to social accountability and applying this lens not only to the training of our Doctor of Veterinary Medicine students, but also to the pursuit of our research and health-care initiatives, OVC has empowered itself to challenge the status quo by integrating existing and new knowledge of the social determinants of human and animal health, especially as they relate to the unique health-care needs of vulnerable and systematically marginalized populations.

Through the Kim and Stu Lang Community Healthcare Partnership Program, OVC has partnered with historically underserved communities to establish support programs, recruit students from diverse backgrounds, and adapt curriculum to prepare graduates to respond to the spectrum of primary veterinary health-care needs of all the communities they serve. This approach has proved instrumental in helping identify, understand, and mitigate barriers that impede access to health care for animals while providing learning opportunities for students so they graduate with the technical and cultural competencies required to lead programs that expand access to animal health care.

OVC’s academic, research, and health-care teams have also leaned into the daily ethical challenges encountered by care providers as they struggle to serve the complex needs of animals. These challenges are an important source of moral injury contributing to endemic disenchantment with the profession. OVC is leading the way in understanding and meeting these challenges by conducting transdisciplinary research on the function of veterinary primary health-care teams across the spectrum of care, in particular the concept of standard of care, the role of the client as a member of the care team, and the inter-relationships of team members and how they can best support each other in health-care delivery.

For example, OVC’s Relationship-Centred Veterinary Medicine research program positions competencies related to effective clinical communication and team-based veterinary health care, among others, as a prerequisite to successful delivery of health-care services to members of underserved communities. This work will inform new team competencies to support our student veterinarians’ educational journey and help veterinary health-care teams work more sustainably with optimal outcomes for team members and their patients.

We are at an exciting point in the evolution of veterinary medical education around the world, part of a movement to reorient education and research towards issues of social justice and global health. The OVC community has accepted its pivotal role in building a more diverse, resilient, inclusive, and effective veterinary workforce, equipped with a renewed sense of purpose, and possessing the capacity to address issues of health inequity in their communities, employ sustainable models of care, enable better health outcomes for all, and honour our commitment to serve the nation in its most inclusive sense.