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FOR many of us, it all starts with a love of animals. That strong connection of the human-animal bond becomes one of the major factors motivating us to become veterinarians.

But becoming part of this noble profession requires more than just a love for animals. The road to becoming a vet involves a love affair with mathematics and science, the stamina and fortitude to withstand the rigorous educational requirements for a minimum of five years and, upon becoming qualified, the demands of practice. Whew! I'm tired just writing this.

Given this, there is a surprisingly widespread misconception that vets are not "real" doctors.

Just to clarify this misconception, veterinary students spend the same number of years in school as our other "human" medical colleagues. Both veterinary and other medical students are required to take classes together because the approach to treating animals and humans is based on the same principles and philosophy. Similar tools are used for diagnosis and treat

ment. For example, both professions use antibiotics, chemotherapy, radiography, blood tests, ultrasonography and MRI (magnetic resonance

imaging), among many others.

Why do we get all of this training? Veterinarians are required to treat multiple species such as dogs, cats, sheep, goats, horses, cows and non-mammals, such as birds and reptiles. We are trained in all aspects of patient care; we can anaesthetise our patients, give dental care and perform complicated and delicate surgical procedures.

We treat many medical conditions, including endocrine diseases (diabetes, pancreatic disorders), infectious diseases that affect animals and humans, inherited diseases, dermatology, cardiology, emergency, critical care and all manner of orthopaedics.

On a given day, a typical veterinarian can put a cast on a broken leg, perform an abdominal surgery, do a blood transfusion, treat a dia

betic cat or give vaccines to puppies.

We have to deal with any problem that walks, crawls, hops or flies into the examination room, without having the benefit of our patients telling us where it hurts or what's wrong. In fact, vets are often

in danger of being bitten, scratched,

ninja kicked or even killed by our

patients.

Veterinarians also act as guardians in the public health arena. We are responsible for the production of herd medicine that focuses on the health and welfare of the animals we eat. If our food supply is not healthy, we humans are certainly at risk.

Historically, human and animal diseases have largely been treated as separate entities since physicians and veterinarians do not commonly communicate or collaborate. However, recent outbreaks of avian influenza (bird flu) and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease), among others, illustrate how intimately we are all connected.

These diseases, called zoonoses, can be transmitted from an animal to a human or from a human to an animal. Veterinarians are keenly aware of this link between human health, animal health and environmental health. One of the most common articulations of this link is the "one medicine, one health, one world" philosophy, which emphasises a collaborative approach to health that fosters co-operation among agencies involved in human and animal health and environmental agencies.

Some doctors specialise in turtles, some specialise in cats, others in horses and, of course, many in humans. But no matter what our patients look like, we are all highly trained professionals and are all passionate about helping our patients and their loved ones to stay healthy and happy.