THAT SHEEP MAY SAFELY GRAZE
Rebuilding Animal Health Care in War-Torn Afghanistan

David M. Sherman

The very mention of Afghanistan conjures images of war, international power politics, the opium trade, and widespread corruption. Yet the untold story of Afghanistan’s seemingly endless misfortune is the disruptive impact that prolonged conflict has had on ordinary rural Afghans, their culture, and the timeless relationship they share with their land and animals. In rural Afghanistan, when animals die, livelihoods are lost, families and communities suffer, and people may perish.

That Sheep May Safely Graze details a determined effort, in the midst of war, to bring essential veterinary services to an agrarian society that depends day in and day out on the well-being and productivity of its animals, but which, because of decades of war and the disintegration of civil society, had no reliable access to even the most basic animal health care.

The book describes how, in the face of many obstacles, a dedicated group of Afghan and expatriate veterinarians working for a small nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Kabul was able to create a national network of over 400 veterinary field units staffed by over 600 veterinary paraprofessionals. These paravets were selected by their own communities and then trained and outfitted by the NGO so that nearly every district in the country that needed basic veterinary services now has reliable access to such services.

Most notably, over a decade after its inception and with Afghanistan still in free fall, this private sector, district-based animal health program remains vitally active. The community-based veterinary paraprofessionals continue to provide quality services to farmers and herders, protecting their animals from the ravages of disease and improving their livelihoods, despite the political upheavals and instability that continue to plague the country. The elements contributing to this sustainability and their application to programs for improved veterinary service delivery in developing countries beyond Afghanistan are described in the narrative.

KEY POINTS

- Illustrates the importance of healthy livestock for rural people in developing countries and the international opportunities for veterinarians to contribute to nation-building through improved animal health care programs around the world.
- Offers a rare, sympathetic view of ordinary Afghans, the disappointments and tragedies that have affected their personal lives, their everyday graciousness and hospitality, their resilience and determination in the face of thirty years of war, and their hopes and dreams for the future.
- Describes the successful development of a sustainable, private sector, community-based, national animal health care system for farmers and herders in Afghanistan in the face of numerous political, economic, and logistical obstacles arising from a variety of sources.

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PRAISE FOR THAT SHEEP MAY SAFELY GRAZE

“American veterinarian David Sherman is offered an opportunity to help rebuild the animal care system for livestock in war-torn Afghanistan. Recognizing that healthy livestock can mean the difference between hopeless poverty and economic stability for rural people in this troubled country, he jumps at the chance. This is the story of that development effort, written in a manner that is inspiring, candid, informative, and easy to read. Sherman relates, with empathy and insight, the challenges and conflicts that he and his colleagues faced to successfully establish a national network of veterinary field units to improve the health and productivity of animals, and the livelihoods of people throughout rural Afghanistan.”

— René A. Carlson, DVM, President, World Veterinary Association (2014–2017)

“Dr. David Sherman’s account of his experiences in post-Taliban Afghanistan, working to improve veterinary training and treatment for livestock by establishing a network of rural vet centers, is a hard-hitting cautionary tale leavened with hilarity and warmth. He and his colleagues must constantly navigate bureaucratic rivalries and improvise to overcome logistical obstacles. Yet the author finds glimpses of charm and beauty in an impoverished, militarized setting. His most meaningful passages are about animals—whether examining an ailing pig at the Kabul Zoo or a cow at the home of his office cleaner, where he relaxes under a mulberry tree and is later gratified to learn the cow has delivered a healthy calf. Despite all the frustrations, the reader can see what keeps drawing Sherman back to this hard-scrabble war zone, where both animals and people struggle daily to survive.”

— Pamela Constable, Foreign Correspondent, The Washington Post

“There are literally billions of animals (cows, sheep, goats, etc.) that often represent the only assets extremely poor rural families depend on for income, nutrition, status, power, fiber, fertilizer, fuel, and more. One of the major challenges facing these farmers and herders is the health of their animals. Paraveterinary (extension and clinical service) networks are often discussed but rarely well-established on any kind of sustainable and self-reliant basis. That Sheep May Safely Graze is an extraordinary story of success in building community-led, community-supported, and accountable networks of paravets who are protecting and enhancing the value of the livestock in Afghanistan. Their lessons learned are relevant to all of us engaged in livestock management, and it makes for a captivating and engrossing book on how things can get done when it matters to people.”

— Pierre Ferrari, President and Chief Executive Officer, Heifer International

“In the world of goat health and husbandry, David Sherman is something of a rock star. He coauthored the first authoritative veterinary textbook exclusively on diseases of goats, and is known as a practitioner, policy maker, and advocate for global animal health. Here he reveals himself as an engaging author and development worker whose passions led him to war-torn Afghanistan to work among poor herders and farmers, and build veterinary service delivery networks and vaccine cold chains to keep their animals healthy. There are few good stories that have come out of America’s adventures in Afghanistan. This is one of them.”

— Brad Kessler, author of Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, a Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese

“Veterinarian and global goat health expert David Sherman shares his big-picture view of the development challenges in Afghanistan based on his years of living there. He illustrates the importance of animal health, often overlooked by development experts, so readers can appreciate how healthy sheep and goats provide livelihoods for rural people, food for hungry cities, and wool for beautiful carpets. The book contains numerous short and charming vignettes that vary from quiet delight in small farm life to portraits of fascinating individuals to frustration with ever-changing political agendas. Most importantly, David invites readers to see the dignity and humanity in his Afghan colleagues and ordinary villagers. Western development aid has resulted in too few successes, but this highly readable account of Afghanistan’s veterinary field unit project is a “how-to” of effective assistance that improves the lives of animals and the people who depend on them.”

— Beth A. Miller, President, International Goat Association