The Rinderpest Plague and an Unrecognized Leader: The Road to a New Profession
Claude Bourgelat- A Man Worth Remembering

"Famous men have the whole earth as their memorial."
- Pericles

History is full of famous inventors, political figures, and entrepreneurs, all of which had a significant impact on society in some recognized way. But history is also made up of unrecognized leaders who, often times, have an even greater impact on society than their famous counterparts. This is the story of one of the greatest and yet unrecognized men of the 18th century, Claude Bourgelat.

It would be remarkable if Claude Bourgelat had just been the father of veterinary medicine as we know it. It is equally significant that his veterinary theories continue to guide the field of veterinary medicine even today. But Bourgelat became a leader and 18th century hero when he established the world’s first veterinary school with the primary goal of preventing the spread of an animal epidemic named rinderpest, a cattle and equine plague that threatened to destroy an entire agrarian society in Western Europe.

Few may remember Bourgelat. However, even if his name is lost in most history books, though there is little doubt that his efforts saved the agriculture industry and likely thousands of lives throughout Europe. For that reason, Claude Bourgelat is a multi-talented, unrecognized leader and hero worth remembering.

Bourgelat’s Early Education and Professional Success

"It is only by studying the book of nature that we can acquire certain knowledge."
- Claude Bourgelat

For any time in history, Claude Bourgelat was a unique man. He was born to a noble family on November 11, 1712.1 Given his noble upbringing, Bourgelat received a classical

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education and intended to practice law as his profession, which he did for seven years.\textsuperscript{2} As a boy, he was known for his intelligence and horsemanship.\textsuperscript{3} Between 1724 and 1729, when Bourgelat was just a young pl\textsubscript{13}ill, he served as a musketeer, a soldier equipped with a musket that fought on foot or horseback.\textsuperscript{4}

At a young age, Bourgelat's exceptional horsemanship led to his being recognized nationally in France. At age twenty-eight, he was named the Grand Equerry of France and the Director of the Lyon Academy of Horsemanship.\textsuperscript{5} This position put him in charge of the royal stables, royal horse breeding and transport of King Louis XV.

When he was thirty-two years old, Bourgelat published his first of many books entitled \textit{Nouveau Newcastle}.\textsuperscript{6} This publication brought him recognition from all over Europe leading some citizens to refer to him as the First Equerry of Europe.\textsuperscript{7} Being recognized for his horsemanship opened up many opportunities for Bourgelat including: owning his own riding school; helping to establish a breeding stable for the King of Poland; and, being named Inspector of the horse-breeding establishments in the Lyon area.\textsuperscript{8}

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A few years after Bourgelat's first publication, he continued to be selected for jobs of prestige and honor, and had he a number of other written works published before he officially began his work regarding the veterinary profession. For example, in 1750, Bourgelat published *Etemens d'hippiatrique or Nouveaux principes sur la connoissance et sur la medicine des chevaux*, which is likely the first publication of any recognition which discussed creating a veterinary educational system and treating horses for disease and other common ailments. This publication led to his election into the French Academy of Sciences and later the Prussian Academy of Sciences. In 1764, he was named Director and Inspector General of the Library of Lyon. Over the span of many years, Bourgelat contributed more than half of the articles in the famous "Encyclopedia" relating to equine and veterinary medicine. Published between 1751 and 1772, the Encyclopedia was unique because it was the first to include many different contributors and because it represented ideas from the Enlightenment.

Bourgelat, a noble born barrister and horseman, who was first to call for an educational system for veterinary medicine, would use his access to royalty and privilege to establish a profession that has lasted more than 200 years.

*Establishing the Veterinary Profession*

"You have opened a new career by the way of experience; you have rendered real service to society."

- Voltaire

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10 Ibid.


Europe was an agrarian society in the 18th century, making the care of livestock (horses and cattle, in particular) one of the most significant issues of that time. Prior to Bourgelat's advances in animal care, farriers and horsemen cared only for farm animals. Bourgelat's expertise and reputation in these areas qualified him to pioneer the new profession and oversee the creation of the first veterinary school in the world.

The need for veterinary medicine reform in the 1700's was great. At that time, there were only individualized doctors for cattle and equines, there were no real animal care rules or guidelines, and most "veterinarians" were self-taught. So, there were few animal doctors in general, and even fewer who could treat both cattle and horses. There were fewer still who could treat any other type of domesticated animals. Consequently, the methods of these so-called "veterinarians" were unsound and in some cases caused more harm than good.

Throughout the 1700's there were numerous deadly diseases which ravaged Europeans (i.e., smallpox and the Black Plague) and their animals (i.e., rinderpest). This caused significant problems for the inhabitants of Europe as most communities were agrarian in nature which relied heavily on their livestock. Given the dependency on livestock for commerce and sustenance, diseases that affected cattle and horses caused significant and direct harm to humans. When disease caused large animal (cattle or equine) deaths, it had the potential to wipe-out entire towns and counties from starvation and other causes.

Bourgelat recognized that an educational facility was necessary to advance veterinary science. He also saw that a consolidated approach to veterinary medicine, one that taught veterinarians a broad range of medicine for various types of animals, was equally necessary to advance animal medicine. Most of all however, Bourgelat saw the urgent need to fight diseases
such as rinderpest before it caused widespread loss of commerce and a depletion of available food for Europe.

On August 4th, 1761; at the bidding of Claude Bourgelat, King Louis XV and his Royal Council of State decreed that a school would be opened that publicly taught the principles and methods of curing livestock diseases. The school would be called The National Veterinary School of Lyon (NVSL), and Claude Bourgelat was its founder.

**Putting a Plan into Action**

"To 'be of service to the human species', 'to ensure the conservation of humanity', 'to observe and reflect' are at the heart of what Bourgelat was founding."

- Howard Harris, PhD (Professional Ethics)

Preparing for the first class of students took Bourgelat one year. On January 10, 1762, Bourgelat signed a six year lease for a historic inn as the location of the first veterinary school. The premises consisted of two buildings surrounding a large courtyard. The school included a dissecting room, a stable, an isolation stable, a botanical garden, a demonstration room, and donnitories. Bourgelat single-handedly created the NVSL’s entire curriculum and guidelines, including the textbooks.

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14 [identifier](http://www.vetagro-sup.fr/forum-2014-des-doctorants-residents-theses/).


16 [identifier](http://www.vetagro-sup.fr/forum-2014-des-doctorants-residents-theses/).

17 *ibid*.

The NVSL’s first students were admitted in 1762. The only requirement of admission was the ability to read and write. NVSL used the original premises until 1798 when the number of students enrolled was too many to fit in the dormitories. As a result, the NVSL was forced to move into a former convent on the river Saone. It then moved again in 1977, and then once more to its current location.

The NVSL was immediately successful and became known throughout the world. Due to its success and recognition, King Louis XV was persuaded by Bourgelat to provide additional funding and for it to be recognized as a "royal school". It was later recognized as the imperial school, and then ultimately a national school of France.

Because the NVSL was so successful, King Louis XV ordered Bourgelat to create a second veterinary school called the School of Alfort. Interestingly, the School of Alfort is the oldest veterinary school in the world to have remained within its original walls. As the popularity of the profession grew, fourteen more veterinary schools were founded in the second

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20 Ibid.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

half of the 18th century, and the quality of animal medicine being practiced improved dramatically.

Ultimately, Bourgelat created the curriculum, rules and regulations for all of the veterinary schools. All of the resources and textbooks used were Bourgelat's own. At Lyon, the students studied external parts, animal osteology and myology, materia medica, splanchnology and bandaging, physiology, medicine, pharmacology, and the appropriate use of animal medicines. At Alfort, along with the classes listed above, there were two major courses: one for future veterinarians and one for military veterinarians. Amazingly, the curriculum and structure of Bourgelat's first veterinary schools can still be seen in today's veterinary schools.

In Bourgelat's Rules for Royal Veterinary Schools there is a quote that summarizes the mission of what was, and what continues to be, taught at his schools.

"Securely anchored in honourable principles which they have prized and of which they have seen examples in the schools, they will never stray from them; they will distinguish between rich and poor; they will not put too high a price on talents which they owe only to the beneficence of the King and the generosity of their country. In short, they will prove by their behaviour that they are all equally convinced that riches lie less in the goods one possesses than in the good one can do."

-Claude Bourgelat


However, notwithstanding Bourgelat’s efforts, a plague that threatened to kill thousands of livestock, and destroy the commerce and availability of food for millions of people, still existed.

**The Rinderpest Plague**

"If a disease affects a large number of people, it is an epidemic; when most of them die, it is a plague."

-Galen

Bourgelat established the first veterinary schools to treat and prevent the blight of animal diseases in Europe, such as rinderpest. Rinderpest is a German word that translates as "cattle plague" in English. During the 18th century, rinderpest, a relative of the measles, canine distemper, and other animal diseases, was ravaging the livestock of Europe. In the late 18th century Rinderpest killed almost 200 million cattle all across Europe. Rinderpest is a highly contagious virus that affects cattle, horses, buffalo, large deer, antelope, pigs, warthogs, giraffes and wildebeests. In short, it kills cloven animals. Rinderpest can be traced as far back as the domestication of cattle in Asia and is considered an "ancient enemy."

If an animal is infected with rinderpest, it is likely to die within seven to ten days after suffering symptoms such as fever, discharge from the eyes and nose, and severe dehydration.

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33 Ibid.


Frighteningly, due to its ability to wipe-out entire herds of cattle, rinderpest has the ability to threaten financial livelihoods and food security.

Immediately upon opening the school, Bourgelat began teaching his students the Lancisis principles to combat rinderpest.\textsuperscript{37} The Lancisis principles included slaughter, movement restrictions, burial of animals in lime, and general inspection of meat.\textsuperscript{38} Within one year, the plague of rinderpest was curtailed in Europe. Thus, Bourgelat and his school’s success in treating and preventing rinderpest essentially saved an entire population.

By the early 20th century, an effective vaccine was thankfully discovered. Bourgelat’s advances in treating and preventing this disease paved the way to eradication of rinderpest from the entire world in May 2011. Rinderpest was the first animal disease and second disease overall (behind smallpox) to be eradicated from the world.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{The Bourgelat Legacy}

"\textit{We have realized the intimacy of the relation which exists between the human and animal machine; this relation is such that either medicine will mutually enlighten and profit from the other when we discard a derisory, harmful prejudice.}"  
- Claude Bourgelat\textsuperscript{40}

Credited with the founding of veterinary medicine, Bourgelat’s work touches virtually every modern person’s life. Over time, Bourgelat’s rules and regulations on animal care have been updated as our society advances, so no modern rules and regulations are exactly the same as

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/disease.php?name=rinderpesl

http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/NewsEvents/ucm262345.htm

the original. However, undoubtedly, there is a direct correlation between the original and modern day principles of animal care, and it is safe to say that Bourgelat paved the way to today's modern schools.

VetAgro Sup is the French veterinary school that is the descendant of the National Veterinary School of Lyon. VetAgro Sup is one of the remaining educational facilities where Bourgelat is remembered and honored. Presently, an entire branch of the school is named after him at VetAgro Sup. This branch of the school is a technology platform dedicated to pre-clinical trials on small animals, and its design and operation are centered on respect for animal welfare and best laboratory practices. Bourgelat was an advocate for improved laboratory practices, so this branch of VetAgro Sup is named accordingly. Interestingly, a new statue of Bourgelat was recently inaugurated on campus on July 4, 2014, because the original was melted by German troops in WWI. The original mold was found when the school moved campuses, so the new statue was made using the original mold.

In total, approximately eight of Bourgelat's major written works were published. In addition to those works, he wrote numerous textbooks, rule books and encyclopedia entries. Some of these publications, paired with other pioneers publications in the medical field, were

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43 Ibid.


45 Ibid.
part of the first veterinary classics. These publications brought recognition to Bourgelat in his earlier years and added to his successes as he advanced in the veterinary profession later on in life.

Bourgelat's last publication was in 1777 and was entitled Reglement pour les Ecoles Royales Veterinaires (Rules for the Royal Veterinary Schools). Bourgelat taught until he died on January 3, 1779 at age 67. It is believed that he died from an attack of gout, which he lived with for 30 years before his death.

**An Unrecognized Hero**

"Without any doubt, he can be described as a visionary and a benefactor of humankind."

-Jean-Francois Char, Y

Ask a farmer how important veterinarians are to her industry, and you will hear how critical a good veterinarian is to her financial success. Ask a pet owner how important the hometown vet is to her family, and you can expect a touching story. Ask those same people if they have ever heard of Claude Bourgelat — do not be surprised if they are unable to recognize him.

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50 Ibid.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Annotation: Claude Bourgelat spent hours creating rules and regulations for his schools, some of which are still used today. Many pages of his collection of rules were found and can be referred to.


Annotation: Claude Bourgelat worked with two other influential horsemen to create a three volume set of books that detail horses, their physical structure, diet, etc.

Secondary Sources


Annotation: This source was published online by the Joint FAO/IAEA Programme and includes the complete history of rinderpest.


Annotation: An article in the fall newsletter for the Florida Department of Health discusses the history of rinderpest and the steps taken to eradicate it from our society.


Annotation: The World Organization for Animal Health (Oie) published an article online that focuses on the post eradication phase of rinderpest and the effort it took to get there.


Annotation: The Center for Food Security and Public Health offers a small variety of sources regarding rinderpest on their website including a PowerPoint.

Annotation: The Center for Food Security and Public Health offers a small variety of sources regarding rinderpest on their website including a condensed disease summary.


Annotation: Two PowerPoints were created to inform about the history of horse doctors. It covered information from 460 BC to 2006.


Annotation: Surprisingly, many people are both lawyer and veterinarian. Claude Bourgelat was one of these people and is discussed in this source.


Annotation: This source discusses Claude Bourgelat, his professions, and his many accomplishments including being a recognized author and being accredited for creating the entire veterinary profession.


Annotation: A newsletter that includes the life of Claude Bourgelat as well as the challenges and great successes faced in the making of the veterinary profession.


Annotation: A PDF was presented at an assembly of the Asian Association of Veterinary Schools and included a very famous quote from Bourgelat that is still referred back to today.


Annotation: VetAgro Sup is the name of the current veterinary school that originated from Bourgelat’s school. The FDA article cited provides information about the origins of the school.

Annotation: This source is a section of the VetAgro Sup website, a veterinary school that can be directly traced back to The National Veterinary School of Lyon, which discusses the history and inauguration of a new statue of Bourgelat.


Annotation: This source is a section of the VetAgro Sup website, a veterinary school that can be directly traced back to The National Veterinary School of Lyon, that gives a detailed explanation of how the school came to be.


Annotation: An entire branch of the current veterinary school is dedicated to Bourgelat. This source explains the general purposes and services.