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## Ethics In Veterinary Practice In Nigeria: Challenges And The Way-Forward

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### SUMMARY

Ethics is a code of conduct governing an individual or group of people. Veterinary ethics is a set of moral principles, drawn from professional and animal ethics, to enable Veterinarians fulfill their professional and moral obligations in their relationships with colleagues, patients, clients and the society at large. The hallmarks of veterinary ethics, as enshrined in the veterinary oath, is protection of animal health, relief of animal suffering, conservation of animal resources and promotion of public health. However, inadequate security in slaughterhouses and excessive quest for quick financial gains among stakeholders in agro-veterinary industry, are some of the major challenges bedeviling full enforcement of ethical standards in veterinary practice in Nigeria. Also, global rise in animal-human relationship/bonding, which may make recommendation of euthanasia in debilitating animals difficult, has emerged as a major ethical challenge to Veterinarians, especially those in pet practice. These challenges underscore the need for review of the existing veterinary code of ethics, to reflect the present-day challenges. Greater partnership between Veterinarians and law enforcement agencies, for provision of adequate security in slaughterhouses nationwide is imperative; to enable veterinarians fulfill their professional obligation of promoting public health through meat inspection. Prompt payment of compensation to owners of condemned carcasses and placement of more emphasis on the need for complete adherence to ethical standard during veterinary training programmes are indispensable to improve ethical standards in veterinary practice in Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Veterinary ethics, veterinary practice, ethical responsibilities, ethical challenges, way-forward, Veterinarian

## INTRODUCTION

Veterinary medicine is a discipline that deals primarily with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, disorder and injury in animals. The major goal of veterinary medicine is to improve animal health and welfare, promote public health and conserve animal resources as well as the environment. In pursuit of this noble goal, there is the need for adherence to professional ethics and code of conduct. While most issues of veterinary professional ethics are taught under veterinary ethics and jurisprudence, during the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) training programme at the various accredited veterinary faculties in Nigerian universities; the Veterinary Council of Nigeria (VCN) in a bid to advance veterinary ethical standard among all registered Nigerian Veterinarians, found it necessary to provide them with a handbook containing guidelines on veterinary ethics; to preserve the good reputation of the profession and her members. The first attempt by the Council to produce such guidance for Veterinarians was made between 1952 and 1958 (VCN 2006). The guideline is reviewed and updated periodically, in line with the principles of veterinary ethics, to guide Veterinarians in their relationship with their patients, clients, colleagues and the society in general.

The simplest way of defining ethics is to put it as a code of conduct governing an individual or group of people. Ethics is also a set of principles or beliefs that governs people's view of what is right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust as regards one's moral duties and obligations (Rollin, 2006). Ethics provides an essential link between what is strictly legal and what is simply equitable in social sense, in accordance with the principle of natural justice (Stephens, 2012). Veterinary ethics is a set of moral

principles, drawn from professional and animal ethics, to enable Veterinarians fulfill their professional and moral obligations in their relationships with patients (animals) and fellow human beings. Hence, veterinary ethics ensures that the patient, client, the public, as well as the Veterinarian benefits from the professional services offered by Veterinarians. Veterinary ethics is an amalgam of different professional ethics and the subject of animal ethics (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015).

While animal ethics deals with moral obligations that people have for animals, veterinary ethics focuses primarily on professional responsibilities, moral obligations and rational judgments required of veterinarians and auxiliary veterinarians, especially during the discharge of their professional duties of providing veterinary services or care (Tannenbaum, 1995; Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). An individual's moral judgment is dependent on one's cognitive developmental process and levels of reasoning - pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Moral judgment centers on prevention of punishment and satisfaction of personal interests, desire to maintain societal laws, institutional rules and universal ethical principles of justice and impartiality for the good and welfare of all (Verrinder *et al.* 2016).

Ethical treatment of animals is necessitated by the fact that animals are responsive beings; in that they feel pain, recognize their environments, express happiness, and can bond with people (Gardiner, 2003; Stephens, 2012). Therefore, veterinary ethics is concerned primarily with practical application of ethical principles and moral standards in the Veterinarians' conducts as an individual and during veterinary service delivery. Veterinary ethics is also concerned with the Veterinarians' relationships with

colleagues, patients, clients, other professional bodies, the legal authorities, the law enforcement agents and the public at large (Stephens, 2012; Magalhaes-santana *et al.* 2017).

Non-compliance to ethical provisions in any profession threatens the public image and reputation of the profession (Magalhaes-santana *et al.* 2017), thus adherence to veterinary ethical standards should be the business of all Veterinarians. This will help to foster peace and unity, and create a sense of responsibility among colleagues in the course of discharge of their professional duties. A sound code of professional ethics promotes orderliness, mutual respect, peace and should be in harmony with both the laws of the country and the principle of equity and justice.

## DEVELOPMENT OF VETERINARY ETHICS

As part of veterinary training programme in accredited veterinary faculties and colleges in Nigeria, veterinary ethics and jurisprudence are taught during the programme to expose students to a set of moral principles and values, including laws governing the practice of veterinary profession. In the development of veterinary ethics, important factors such as the dynamic nature of veterinary practice, availability of technologies and technological advancement, socio-cultural practices of people and differences in livestock production systems across different locations and regions were considered. Additionally, ideas were borrowed from medical, research, and animal ethics, as well as from animal welfare to guide the Veterinarian's relationships with their patients and fellow human beings (Gardiner, 2003; Woods, 2013). This robust content of veterinary ethics, intended for advancement of ethical competence in practicing veterinarians,

may explain why most clients have firm belief in the Veterinarians' ability to perform beyond their expectation; and in the best interest of the patient, in all areas of veterinary clinical practice.

This unwavering trust in the Veterinarians by the clients is called "aesculapian" authority. The "aesculapian" authority is socially conferred on the healing professions generally (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). It emanated from the fact that most clients are confident that veterinarians, through their superior knowledge, ethical values and self-regulation of the profession; will provide excellent veterinary services or care; and also take all decisions in the best interest of the patient and client, at all times. The "aesculapian" authority and sense of professionalism make veterinary doctors to enjoy lots of respect and goodwill from the clients and also give them near monopoly in the provision of veterinary services worldwide (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). However, this goodwill of the clients can be abused if ethical standards, guiding the veterinary profession are neglected or compromised (Rollin, 2006). That is why the VCN, through acts of parliaments, was set up to regulate veterinary activities in Nigeria, for the good of the profession, her members and the nation at large. The clients' trust on the veterinarian is centered on three core aspects of "aesculapian" authority which are "sapiential", "moral" and "charismatic" authorities (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015).

The "sapiential authority" refers to belief in the wisdom and superior knowledge possessed by Veterinarians in veterinary medical issues *vis-a-vis* the clients (Tannenbaum, 1995). The "moral authority" points to the client's firm belief in the fact that veterinarians have the professional and moral

obligations to act and provide advice and guidance in the best interests of their patients and clients (Tannenbaum, 1995). The last aspect, “charismatic authority” is based on the belief that healers have divine or magical powers to heal (Tannenbaum, 1995). Aesculapian authority therefore helps clients believe that Veterinarians can solve animal health problems, avoid death of animal or at least postpone it.

## **BRANCHES OF VETERINARY ETHICS**

Tannenbaum, (1995) and Kimera and Mlangwa, (2015) described four branches of veterinary ethics (i) descriptive veterinary ethics, (ii) official veterinary ethics, (iii) administrative veterinary ethics, and (iv) normative veterinary ethics. These branches of veterinary ethics are briefly discussed below.

### **Descriptive Veterinary Ethics**

According to Kimera and Mlangwa (2015), this branch of veterinary ethics deals with factual descriptions of ethical behaviour and belief systems. It includes description of ethical reasoning and perspectives of stakeholders on ethical issues (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). For instance, those aspects of professional conducts and attitudes which members of the profession considers as being good or bad. In view of the diverse socio-cultural characteristics of people in different society, it is therefore empirical that a combination of methods (natural and scientific) are employed in setting ethical values in order to fairly determine what is ethically right or wrong in any profession or societies (Tannenbaum, 1995).

### **Official Veterinary Ethics**

Official veterinary ethics refers to ethical standards which are formally adopted by professional bodies (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015), such as the veterinary profession. Following the adoption of ethical standards, it become legally binding on all members of such profession unless it is reviewed. The harshest penalty for a violator is usually expulsion from the profession. Official veterinary ethics helps to promote and protect the public image and reputation of the profession (Tannenbaum, 1995; Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015).

### **Administrative Veterinary Ethics**

Administrative veterinary ethics are those administered by the regulatory bodies, such as Veterinary Council of Nigeria, to regulate veterinary practice and other activities in which Veterinarians and animal health paraprofessionals are engage in. Administrative veterinary ethics usually have legal backing and its violation may result in prosecution (with civil or criminal penalties), suspension from practice or outright deregistration (Tannenbaum, 1995). The main purpose of administrative ethics is to protect the interest of the public and some times, the image of the profession (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015).

### **Normative Veterinary Ethics**

Normative veterinary ethics describes the search for “correct” norms or professional behaviours and attitudes in veterinary practice (Tannenbaum, 1995). This is the most fundamental branch as it gives the philosophical underpinning of ethics, which one may apply in solving ethical dilemmas and to which both official and administrative branches of veterinary ethics draw their principles to develop standards, codes and

rules (Sugarman and Sulmasy 2010). Normative ethics raises questions of interest for descriptive ethics. Normative ethics is about values, whereas descriptive ethics is about facts.

## PRINCIPLES OF VETERINARY ETHICS

In consonance with the human medical ethics, veterinarians are expected to adhere strictly to a code of ethical conduct known as the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics (PVME). The nine PVME according to Bourque and Horney (2016) are outlined below:

1. *A veterinarian shall be influenced only by the welfare of the patient, the needs of the client, the safety of the public, the necessity for livestock or environmental conservation and the need to preserve the public trust vested in the veterinary profession; and shall therefore avoid conflicts of interest or the appearance thereof.*
2. *All veterinarians shall provide competent veterinary services in line with the terms and provisions of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR); with deep compassion and utmost respect for animal welfare, public health and environmental protection.*
3. *A veterinarian shall strive to maintain the standards of the veterinary profession, remain honest in all professional interactions, and report erring colleagues or those who are wanting in character or competence to appropriate veterinary authority for disciplinary actions.*
4. *Veterinarians shall be law-abiding but have the responsibility of seeking changes to laws and regulations that are inimical to the welfare and interests of the patient, client and public health.*
5. *A veterinarian shall respect the rights of clients, colleagues, other professionals and shall protect veterinary medical information within the limits of the law.*
6. *Veterinarians shall continue to study in order to obtain more scientific knowledge for, making relevant information available to clients, colleagues, the public; and to fulfill his obligations as enshrined in the veterinary oath.*
7. *Veterinarian shall, in the course of provision of appropriate veterinary care, except in emergencies, be at liberty to choose whom to serve or associate with, and the environment in which to render the veterinary services.*
8. *Veterinary doctors should treat all persons in all professional activity or circumstance in which they may be involved solely as individuals, on the basis of their personal abilities, qualifications, and other relevant qualities.*
9. *Veterinarians have the responsibility of participating in community services in line with the provisions of the veterinary oath, and should therefore strive to do so.*

## THE VETERINARY OATH

The importance of veterinary professional ethics is reflected in the Veterinary oaths taken by veterinarians as they enter the profession or as they are registered to practice. A veterinarian's professional activities are guided by the veterinary oath. The oath makes it obligatory for veterinarians to uphold the interest, honour and dignity of the veterinary profession by practicing the profession conscientiously, with dignity and in line with the principles of veterinary ethics (CVMA, 1995; AVMA, 2016). The oath also makes it compulsory for veterinary doctors to use their scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit

of the society, by protecting animal health, relieving animal suffering, conserving animal resources, promoting public health and advancing veterinary medical knowledge (CVMA, 1995; Yeates 2009; AVMA, 2016). In accordance with the principles of veterinary ethics, as approved by the VCN, all Nigerian veterinarians, on formal induction to the veterinary profession, must take the Veterinary oath.

## **ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF VETERINARIANS**

In order to satisfy the provisions of the Veterinary oath and PVME, veterinarians have ethical responsibilities to perform towards animals, clients, the veterinary profession, the public (society) and his/her self. Some of these responsibilities as outlined by Bourque are Horney (2016) are listed below.

### **A. Veterinarians' Ethical Responsibilities to Animals:**

1. Veterinarians have the primary responsibility to relieve animal sufferings and pains due to disease, disability, maltreatment, malnutrition, animal right abuse, etc.
2. Veterinarians must provide adequate and appropriate veterinary services considering the health and welfare needs of the patients, acceptable demands of the clients and safety of the public.
3. Veterinarians must follow acceptable professional procedures in the course of providing veterinary services or care.
4. Veterinarians must keep within their own area of competence and make referral responsibly.
5. Irrespective of practice ownership, all decisions regarding diagnosis, prognosis and recommendations for treatment of

patients or veterinary services provided to clients, should be made by veterinarians.

6. Veterinarians should not allow their judgment to be influenced by personal gains or aggrandizements during veterinary service delivery; but should be guided by the needs of the patients and the health and safety of the public.
7. Veterinarians have an ethical obligation to provide essential or emergency services for animals in life threatening conditions, pending clients' agreement or consent.
8. Veterinarians must share knowledge and ideas for improvement of health and welfare of animal under their custody.
9. Veterinarians should endeavour to advance their professional knowledge and skills, work together with colleagues and other professionals for efficient service delivery and professional advancement.
10. Euthanasia of animals is an ethical veterinary procedure that must be done humanely and with utmost care.

### **B. Veterinarians' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients:**

Ethical responsibilities of Veterinarians to their clients, as outlined by Bourque are Horney (2016), are as follow:

1. Veterinarians must be truthful, fair and compassionate in all dealings with clients and should consider clients' needs and concerns, when such are not at variance with the provisions of the Veterinary oath or PVME
2. Veterinarians must provide independent and unbiased veterinary medical advice to the client as regards the health and welfare needs of the patient
3. All Veterinarians are free to choose whom they may serve, in line with the provisions of the VCPR, provided the presenting

condition of the patient is not an emergency or one that may threaten public health if not handled immediately.

4. Veterinarians must communicate effectively with clients and obtain informed consent from animal owners prior to treatments or commencement of any procedure.
5. A decision to consult or make referral should be made together by the attending veterinarian and the client.
6. Veterinarians are entitled to charge fees for their professional services but such fees should be fair and the public health implication of not handling the presenting disease condition must be paramount.
7. Veterinarians in clinical practice must keep clinical and client records meticulously.
8. Veterinarians and their associates should protect the personal privacy of patients and clients; except when the revelation of the health condition is required by the law or is essential to protect the health and welfare of other individuals or animals.
9. Veterinarians should address client complaints in an appropriate and timely manner.
10. Veterinarians should take all reasonable steps to prevent harm to patients.

### **C. Veterinarians' Ethical Responsibilities to the Profession:**

Veterinarians have enormous ethical obligations to the veterinary profession. Some of the ethical responsibilities of veterinarians to the profession, as listed by Bourque are Horney (2016), are:

1. All veterinarians have obligation to uphold the integrity, dignity and goodwill the profession enjoys, and also be her worthy ambassadors wherever they may found themselves.

2. Veterinarians should be honest, fair-minded, courteous and present a professional appearance as well as follow acceptable professional procedures in the discharge of their duties.
3. Veterinarians must not slander or tannish the image of the profession or reputation of their colleagues but should however report professional misconducts to the appropriate veterinary authority.
4. As health professionals striving to promote animal and public health, veterinarians must evaluate and treat all persons as individuals, on the basis of their personal capabilities, qualifications, and other characteristics only; and hence reject all forms of prejudice or discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic class, race, tribe, religion, gender, political affiliation, ethnicity, etc; that may limit access to quality animal and public health care services.
5. Veterinarians who play supervisory role over others should make frantic efforts to ensure that the supervisee kowtows to accepted standards of ethical conduct and practice.
6. Veterinarians must improve their professional knowledge and skills, and collaborate with other professionals in the quest for professional development and improved veterinary service delivery.
7. When veterinary conferences or gatherings are sponsored by non-veterinary organization, the national veterinary body/association or the branch hosting the program, not the sponsor, should take control of the contents and speakers at the conference.
8. It is unethical to place professional knowledge, credentials or services at the disposal of any nonprofessional group or individual to give credibility to illegal practice of veterinary medicine.

9. It is unethical for veterinarians to use or permit the use of their names, signatures or professional status to promote sale of ethical products in a manner which violates the manufacturer's instruction for safe and efficacious use of the product.
10. Veterinarians who have earned professional title from an accredited veterinary college or faculty should be addressed by such titles during professionally gatherings. Addressing veterinarians by their chieftaincy or religious titles, during formal meetings should be discouraged as it questions the ethical integrity and competence of individuals involved.

#### **D. Veterinarians' Ethical Responsibilities to the Public (society):**

1. Veterinarians should endeavour to protect public health, animal health and welfare, and the environment while discharging their professional duties (Bourque are Horney, 2016).
2. Where and when possible, veterinarians should engage in community services, charity or philanthropic outreaches for the good of the society (Bourque are Horney, 2016).

#### **E. Veterinarian's Ethical Responsibilities to his/her Self:**

1. Veterinarians shall not die in silence but should seek assistance from appropriately qualified professionals for personal challenges that may negatively affect service delivery to patients, clients or the society (Bourque are Horney, 2016).
2. Veterinarians should protect and enhance their own health and vitality by identifying

and avoiding (where possible) stress and risk factors that put their lives in jeopardy; and effectively manage them by routine medical health checks and practicing appropriate coping strategies (Bourque are Horney, 2016).

### **ANIMAL ETHICS AND WELFARE**

Animal ethics describes how nonhuman animals ought to be treated in the course of their interaction with human (human-animal relationships). The subject matter encapsulates animal rights, animal welfare, animal cognition, wildlife conservation, moral status of nonhuman animals, and the concept of nonhuman personhood (Grandin, 2013). Animal welfare deals primarily with the well-being of animals. Good animal welfare standards vary significantly from one country to another and from one profession to another across the globe (Grandin, 2013; Hewson, 2003). Some parameters used to measure animal welfare status include longevity, absence of disease, body condition score, husbandry system, physiology condition, etc.

Animal welfare concern is often based on the belief that nonhuman animals are able to perceive feelings; and as such consideration should be given to their well-being or suffering, especially when they are under the care of humans (Broom, 1991). These concerns include how food animals are slaughtered for food, how laboratory animals are used in scientific research, the condition in which pets, caged birds or zoological animals are kept, and finally how human activities affect the welfare and survival of wild species. An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and if it is not



suffering from unpleasant conditions such as pain, fear and distress (Duncan, 1996).

## **ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN VETERINARY PRACTICE**

### **Challenge of Allegiance**

Veterinarians are often on ethical front lines. Balancing the demands of animal health, clients, employers, society and animal welfare is most times, a herculean task for which we are sometimes poorly prepared (Morgan and McDonald, 2007; Shanan, 2011; Christiansen *et al.* 2016). The veterinarian attends to his/her patient who in most cases has an owner. One may now ask, to whom should the veterinarians' primary responsibility be? Should it be to the animal or to the owner? This is a fundamental challenge of veterinary ethics. It is possible that the client's position on the health status of the animal is at variance with the ethical responsibilities of veterinarians as enshrined in the Veterinary oath and PVME. At some other times, especially as concerns veterinarians in the business line, an ethical dilemma may arise when the boss' (who may not be a veterinarian) position differs with ethical practices expected of veterinarians.

### **Dualistic nature of the veterinary profession**

Veterinary medicine is dualistic in nature. On one hand, it is a medical field, and as such the professional allegiance of the veterinarian is to his/her patient as is the case in medical ethics. On the other hand, veterinary medicine is also an agricultural-based subject. This brings forth economic considerations centered on the client and returns to the practice. In economics, one may hold property rights over animals implying that they may own animals as private goods, make use of the animal for economic gains, and may dispose the animal in a manner

deemed fit within the law (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). The client will therefore be the owner holding these property rights. The view of animals as a property is the singular most important source of ethical dilemma faced by veterinarians (Main, 2006; Morgan and McDonald, 2007). It also has negative effect on VCPR. The owner may think that the veterinarian position should be secondary to his since he owns the animal and ask the veterinarian to comply with his demand.

### **Bond Between Animals and the Owners**

There is also the concept of bonding between animals (pets) and their owners, and this may be fairly strong with respect to pet animals and high-valued animals (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). A strong bond may create a psychological barrier between the veterinarian and the client especially in issues connected with euthanasia (Kimera and Mlangwa, 2015). A big ethical dilemma may ensue when a veterinarian in private pet practice, who swore an oath to relieve animal suffering, recommends euthanasia (for a debilitated very old dog diagnosed of liver and brain cancer with evidence of excruciating pain) but the client, who loves his animal so much withholds assent for euthanasia but rather insist on chemotherapy.

### **Non-payment of compensation for condemned carcasses at the slaughterhouses**

During routine meat inspection at the abattoirs and slaughterhouses, veterinarians are often confronted with one of the most difficult challenges in the profession. They usually find themselves in a situation where they have ethical obligation to condemn meat carcasses containing zoonotic lesions in order to safeguard public health but the butchers and meat vendors usually do not see the need for

such carcass condemnation due to fear of financial losses; as government compensation for condemned carcasses or organs are usually not paid nowadays (Omotosho *et al.* 2016). The butchers usually resist the meat condemnation and threaten the life of the inspector (veterinarian) if he/she insists on the condemnation. In this type of situation, veterinarians are in big dilemma as their lives are under serious threat, security personnel are usually absent in the abattoirs/slaughterhouses and they are under oath to protect public health.

### THE WAY-FORWARD

1. There is need for awareness creation through workshops, farmers' forum, and seminars to enlighten animal owners on the need to cooperate with veterinarians in the provision of veterinary service and care to their animals. The owners should readily accept the expert opinions of the veterinarians in management and disposal of clinical cases of their animals irrespective of economic gains or emotional attachments they may have for their animals.
2. Placement of more emphasis on the need for practicing veterinarians to adhere strictly to the principles of veterinary ethics, ethical challenges notwithstanding, is indispensable in building ethically-guided veterinarians. It will also help to further equip veterinarians to demonstrate their ethical competence even in the midst of obvious ethical dilemma.
3. Government should find a way to raise fund for regular and prompt payment of compensations for condemned carcasses as enshrined in meat inspection edict. This may reduce the hostility and uncooperative attitude of some abattoir workers, especially butchers, meat sellers and owners of slaughter animal, so that they can cooperate with meat inspectors (veterinarians) in the discharge of their professional duties in abattoirs and slaughterhouses nationwide.
4. Greater partnership or collaboration with security formations in the country is imperative for provision of adequate security in slaughterhouses, especially during meat inspection. This will allow for full implementation of the recommendations of veterinary officers/meat inspectors with respect to condemned carcasses or organs.
5. As technology and novel innovations develop, the practice of giving veterinary care should be improved upon and boundaries between ethical and non-ethical practice need to be redefined as well.
6. Apart from development in technology and innovations, the spectrum of activities for veterinarians also need to be widened to accommodate areas not considered as traditional domain of the veterinary profession. Involvement of veterinarians in these new areas (wildlife, aquatic fauna, and One health approach) demands that ethical standard, in line with the provisions of the veterinary oath and the PVME, in these areas be defined. These new areas should be researched upon for possible incorporation in the curriculum of undergraduate veterinary training and continuing education programmes in Nigerian.
7. There is need for proper definition of sanctions, against unethical practices or behaviors, especially in the emerging veterinary areas or domain. This should be accompanied by strict and full implementation of such sanctions to serve as deterrent to defaulters, in order to

protect the good image and reputation of veterinary profession in Nigeria.

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