

Barristers speak and squawk for the animals

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NOT since Doctor Doolittle have humans handed animals such a loud voice to defend their wants and needs. A group of Melbourne barristers is drawing attention to the legal rights of chickens, cows, pigs and other farm animals.

A free public lecture at Melbourne Law School tonight will attempt to focus attention on why animals, particularly those of the agricultural ilk, deserve legal protection.

US animal protection lawyer and academic Bruce Wagman will deliver the lecture, and will reveal why animal welfare laws are fast becoming one of the most popular subjects in law schools, and a growing area of pro bono legal work.

Victorian barrister Michelle Sharpe, who will introduce tonight's lecture and is an avid defender of animal rights, said farming practices and animal transport, particularly live animal transport, are the key issues in animal welfare and protection legislation.

Sharpe earns her barristers fees in commercial law, but is also the secretary of the Barristers Animal Welfare Panel, a Victorian Bar pro bono committee.

The Panel, comprising 90 Victorian barristers and including 25 silks, provides representation and advice on issues of animal welfare law either pro bono or for a reduced fee.

Sharpe told *The New Lawyer* that involvement of lawyers in animal protection work has swelled. Combined with that, many law schools across the country have started course around animal welfare law.

The panel of barristers is now working to formulate and process proposals for law reform. "So we review the law and consider where it may need to be reformed. And we raise awareness for that and push for that," Sharpe said.

The panel also draws attention to laws that need to be changed, while providing pro bono legal representation to many animal welfare groups.

Sharpe said the panel is now working on overhauling laws to better protect animal welfare, though the details of the possible reforms have not yet been released.

This year, the first Australian text book on animal welfare law, entitled *Animal Law in Australasia*, was published.

"Glaring problems have motivated people. We have seen that the law is moving backwards. There is now a push to separate the protection afforded to companion animals and farm animals.

"Companion animals receive good protection, but there is a real push from farm and agricultural groups to amend the laws in relation to farm animals," she said.

"The laws effectively divide up animals into domestic cute and fuzzy pets, which we care about, and farm animals, which we apparently don't need to care about," Sharpe said.

Professor David Weisbrot, the president of the Australian Law Reform Commission, has previously said he thinks animal law will be the new social justice movement.