STATEMENT OF INTENT FOR BOARD POSITION:

Dear WSAVA Members,

I am Dr. Nalinika Obeyesekere, a companion animal practitioner based in Sri Lanka. Since December I have had the honour to serve you as a WSAVA Executive Board member, appointed by the Executive Board for a term up to the General Assembly 2024 in Lisbon. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to apply for this current board position and continue my engagement and contribution to WSAVA.

The WSAVA has recently launched a new strategic plan for 2023 to 2025. It is my belief that balanced representation from all regions will maximize the effectiveness of WSAVA’s strategic plan. It will support WSAVA’s new initiative, of providing a global status update in the proposed Annual Report. Though not an official requirement, global representation ensures the distinctive challenges and needs of the less developed countries are effectively addressed. Board representation of the regional member associations strengthens the member association contribution and ensures WSAVA’s outlook is truly global.

My focus and experience are in the Asian region, where I have lived and practiced for the past 30+ years. As a clinician piloting one of Sri Lanka’s forward looking, learning and quality focused private hospitals, I am acutely aware of the huge gaps and difficulties faced when attempting to provide high standards of care to our patients. I have travelled to many neighbouring countries as well as to other regions and worked with vets and interacted with a diverse range of pet owners. I have been privileged to have built strong relationships with a variety of colleagues through years of attending WSAVA congresses. These experiences have helped me identify key commonalities and areas that need improvement, within the underdeveloped countries.

The Asian pet industry is growing rapidly, with a significant increase in pet ownership (3 in every 5 people own a pet\(^1\)). However, owner needs and attitudes are different to that of the west. These should be understood in context. It is my belief that Asia must have representation on the WSAVA executive board in order to effectively leverage WSAVA’s projects to positively impact these local issues.

Of WSAVA’s six focus areas for 2023-2025, developing the global community and collegiality (focus II), association development, the “one care” initiative (focus III) and broadening CE opportunities (focus V) are areas I expect to contribute strongly towards.

**Global community:** I am passionate about the immense value of Congress (beyond excellent CE) as a place for global colleagues to meet, greet and build bonds. The range of cultures, professional interests, and personalities one meets and interacts with contributes to personal and professional growth and promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion. It breaks down many pre-conceived notions on gender, race, and religion. I have gained immeasurably from the conversations and friendships with global colleagues developed over many congresses. I want to ensure others are able to benefit from and enjoy this unique experience. As a board member one of my goals will be to facilitate and create possibilities to “get more members to congress”. This will not be easy, but I am looking forwards to taking on the challenge.

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\(^1\) Rakuten Insight – Pet Ownership in Asia
Broadening CE opportunities: A primary area I fervently advocate for and endorse. It is the foundation from which the profession in developing regions improves in quality and gains public respect. WSAVA’s proposed online global platform “WSAVA Village” will be a game changer. In addition, the concept of regional congresses needs to be thoroughly planned and explored, for regions where other CE activity and availability is limited. An ongoing WSAVA endeavour I expect to contribute towards.

Traditional in person and in country CE continues to be invaluable to developing countries where high quality and inspired teaching is a rarity. Just experiencing a superb lecturer and the interpersonal interaction, can be transformational to many young people. Again, this is something I have personally experienced, and would like to ensure future generations have similar opportunity.

Clinical exchange programs between countries are an important pathway to broaden experience. I would like to promote and facilitate these exchanges. Many veterinarians in developing regions have not had an opportunity to “see practice” at high standard hospitals. Their benchmark is often a better practice in their neighbourhood or country which may be well below international standards. Though logistically challenging and potentially expensive, I firmly believe such exchange programs, initially even between regional practices, though ideally between advanced western practices and those in developing regions, will open eyes and open doors to new ideas and possibilities for all parties.

Asian veterinarians require exposure to less conventional subjects. For example, euthanasia is often unacceptable even in terminal illness, among clients and even veterinarians. Knowledge of behaviour, training and pet needs is lacking, again both among owners and veterinarians. Problem behaviours are common and negatively impact the human animal bond. Even with good intentions “well looked after” pets may have little opportunity to express normal behaviours. For example, clients may not take their dogs out for walks/exercise due to fear of parasites and disease. I have encountered many a client who proudly states their dog is rarely let out of the kennel thus is well protected. Puppy and kitten socialization are a novelty. Veterinarians can and should be changemakers. Animal behaviour and welfare are areas where I have knowledge and experience and can assist WSAVA build targeted programs for Asia.

Wellness and Mental health: Beyond these non-traditional, yet clinical areas, there is a huge knowledge gap when it comes to non-clinical issues. Asian cultures have strong taboos and reluctance towards discussing mental health. Even physical health and nutrition are not in focus. Non communicable disease is widespread. Asian veterinarians face unique stresses from area like euthanasia, lack of required veterinary drugs, lack of knowledge and lack of specialists to refer complex cases yet facing client demands. Additionally, balancing implicit and required family obligations for the many female veterinarians, unseemliness, or impropriety of showing emotions for male veterinarians, all exacerbated by general country specific economic problems combined with poor salaries and benefits relative to other professionals, are a few of the long list of Asia specific challenges and stresses. High stress levels and extreme competition negatively impact collegiality. I can support WSAVA’s forward looking non-clinical CE programs to reflect these complex needs.

The special case of Non-Accredited Degrees: An area I am acutely aware of as needing proactive action is the creation of a bridging course for graduates from non-accredited universities. To improve the foundations of knowledge and ensure accepted standards of care, but as
importantly, to allow them access to online master’s level courses in accredited international universities. Currently these graduates are ineligible.

Clinical master’s programs in Companion Animal Medicine are scarce in developing countries. Sri Lanka for example has no advanced studies in companion animal medicine, beyond a BVSc. Local graduates cannot apply for master’s courses (distance education) from accredited institutes. These graduates face an absolute roadblock to their professional development. The WSAVA academy is an ideal platform to provide a bridging program. There are already several foundation level courses. In partnership with an accredited university, WSAVA can create a combination of coursework that would satisfy application requirements. This will provide a huge step up for veterinarians in developing regions, to progress their careers.

**Association Development:** Having witnessed, experienced and been part of the extraordinary growth and improvement in the veterinary profession in Sri Lanka, after and largely due to becoming a WSAVA member; I believe that all developing countries should strive to become members. This will ensure better global standards. I have participated in several association development workshops (Bangladesh, Nepal etc). I look forward to facilitating these programs, which result in expansion of WSAVA’s member network.

**Developing Standards:** Developing minimum global standards of care/hospital standards is an endeavour I staunchly support. My first exposure to this was in Thailand (VPAT; Veterinary Practitioners Association of Thailand). With guidance from WSAVA, as member representative I have worked tenaciously, to develop similar, realistic, locally relevant standards for SCAP (Society of Companion Animal Practitioners/Sri Lanka). These will be presented at the 2023 regional members meeting. As a board member I expect to be assist member organizations to develop such standards. It is the first step to generalizing improved quality across a county.

**Financial Resilience:** My current experience on WSAVA board has illuminated the commitment, new ideas, high capacity, and hard work put in by board members, committees, volunteers, and staff. I believe veterinarians are largely “generous, high capacity” people. Together we can truly achieve a lot. A key limiting factor is adequate funds to action the variety of high demand programs WSAVA is capable of providing. Programs such as getting people to congress and global CE etc. can be achieved in an effective and timely manner with an appreciably greater level of funding.

WSAVA has increased its global reach, reputation, and visibility. It is an opportune time to further strengthen and leverage this visibility to grow and strengthen WSAVAs financial base by looking beyond projects, to funding the organization and its global potential. It’s time for WSAVA to look to endowments and trusts. As an organization we need to reach out to high end, pet loving, individual donors, foundations, and large corporations to fund WSAVA at this organizational level.

I recognize these are all goals that require immense effort, ambition, strategy, and drive and possibly an amount of good luck to achieve. However, they are all endeavours that are worth the effort. I will be honoured to be able to contribute my time and ideas towards the many important future goals of the WSAVA.

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest with any activities likely to require as a WSAVA board member.

Dr Nalinika Obeyesekere