

**Knight A (2010). Improving veterinary attitudes towards animal welfare. *AWSELVA J* 14(1): 7-9.**

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### **Changing attitudes toward animal welfare**

The role of the veterinary profession was historically agricultural, and focused on assisting farmers, or providing assistance to horse owners. In modern, developed societies, however, rising social affluence has facilitated increased expenditure on companion animals, to the point where the overwhelming majority of contemporary veterinarians work almost entirely with these species. To some extent this has also allowed greater provision of veterinary services to agricultural species; however, intensification of the scale of modern farms and increased market competition have also limited these trends.

Social attitudes toward animal welfare have improved concurrently with increased knowledge about animals, increasing social affluence, and the urbanisation of society; and to some extent the attitudes of veterinarians have similarly progressed. However, recently-documented positions of some veterinary associations suggest veterinary attitudes toward animal welfare often lag behind those of the general public.

### **Welfare standards of veterinary associations**

In 2006, a colleague and I reviewed the positions of four national and one international veterinary associations (including the British Veterinary Association) on five animal use practices resulting in significant welfare concerns (1). They included the confinement of laying hens in so-called ‘battery’ cages; of pregnant sows kept in gestation crates; the use of small crates and nutritionally deficient diets for ‘veal’ calves; the harmful use of animals in scientific research and education; and canine tail docking. In all five cases, public surveys had demonstrated widespread and persistent concern about animal welfare.

In contrast, many of these issues were not adequately addressed by the veterinary associations surveyed, or were not opposed by them — in some cases, contrary to substantial animal welfare science (2). Such results strongly indicate that many veterinarians lag behind the general public in their desire for animal welfare reforms.

An obvious topical example is the attention afforded to purebred dogs. Breeding dogs with hereditary impairments likely to be contrary to good welfare, for aesthetic reasons or to meet breed standards, is morally reprehensible. The recent, widespread condemnation of such practices by veterinarians and their representative associations is laudable. Where, however, was that condemnation prior to Jemima Harrison’s 2008 BBC One documentary, *Pedigree Dogs Exposed?*

Notwithstanding individual, courageous exceptions, it appears that a certain critical mass of public opposition to animal exploitation must be present before the veterinary profession finds the courage to add its weight to the debate *en masse*. Such ‘leadership from the rear’ is neither courageous nor honourable.

### **Factors contributing to poor welfare standards**

Several factors appear to be responsible for such poor animal welfare standards of veterinarians and their professional associations.

#### ***Selection of veterinary students***

The highly demanding nature of veterinary education warrants the selection of students able to demonstrate a strong record of academic success. Generally speaking, such success is most

easily demonstrated in advanced mathematics and science subjects, which are considered among the most difficult. Despite the lack of relevance to veterinary practice of some of these disciplines, this selection tool most rapidly results in quantitative, objective outcomes, when compared to alternatives such as assessments of character or work experience; and both historically and in many countries today remains the major selection method.

However, high attrition rates of veterinarians in the first few years post-graduation has resulted in increasing recognition of the importance of substantial prior work experience in veterinary or related animal care settings, which has now become an important part of the selection process in countries like the UK and US.

Despite increasing recognition that good communication skills are essential to success in veterinary practice, rigorous examination of these are not yet incorporated within most selection criteria.

And despite increasing social concern regarding animal welfare issues — about which veterinarians are widely expected by the general public to possess a considerable degree of expertise — selection criteria rarely, if ever, examine knowledge of animal welfare issues, underlying compassion for animals, or critical thinking ability.

The predictable results are that almost all populations of veterinary students are academically very strong, particularly in the sciences; may or may not possess substantial prior veterinary work experience; and may not possess communication skills, knowledge of animal welfare issues, underlying compassion for animals, or critical thinking ability, much different from that of the general student population.

### ***Education of veterinary students***

The importance of educating veterinary students about animal welfare issues, and of facilitating their development of the critical thinking skills necessary to formulate sound positions on these social controversies, is increasingly recognized; and the incorporation of bioethics and critical reasoning courses within veterinary curricula is increasing worldwide. Nevertheless, the proportion of veterinary students receiving such formal education remains small.

In contrast, there is a ‘hidden curriculum’ endorsing harmful animal use, which remains commonplace within veterinary curricula internationally. Students are typically required to harm and kill animals in preclinical subjects such as anatomy (dissection, often of purpose-killed animals or animals from ethically-questionable sources), and physiology, biochemistry and pharmacology (‘demonstration’ experiments on living animals, usually of long-established scientific concepts, with animals normally killed during or after the experiment). Students are typically required to practice surgical and anaesthetic skills via anaesthetising healthy animals, conducting surgical procedures on them, and killing any survivors at the end (not all survive these typically extended operations).

In contrast, the UK is the only major country in the developed world where harmful animal use has been removed from the veterinary surgical curriculum for decades. Instead, students gain practical experience by assisting with beneficial surgeries during extramural rotations at private veterinary clinics and elsewhere.

Humane alternatives to such harmful animal use in veterinary education include computer simulations, videos, *ethically-sourced cadavers* obtained from animals euthanized for medical reasons, or that have died naturally or in accidents, preserved specimens, models, diagrams, non-invasive self-experimentation, and supervised clinical and surgical experiences. Alternative veterinary surgical courses ideally comprise three stages. Students learn basic manual skills such as suturing and instrument handling using knot-tying boards, simulated

organs, and other models. They then progress to simulated surgery on ethically-sourced cadavers, and finally they observe, assist with, and then perform beneficial surgery under close supervision on real patients (frequently during animal shelter neutering programs), similar to the training of physicians.

At least 33 papers have described studies examining the ability of humane alternatives such as these to impart knowledge or clinical or surgical skills, in comparison to traditional harmful animal use. Of eleven distinct studies of veterinary student learning outcomes published from 1989 to 2006, nine assessed surgical training — historically the discipline involving greatest harmful animal use. 45.5% (5/11) demonstrated superior learning outcomes using more humane alternatives. Another 45.5% (5/11) demonstrated equivalent learning outcomes, and 9.1% (1/11) demonstrated inferior learning outcomes (3).

At least 29 papers in which comparison with harmful animal use did not occur have illustrated additional benefits of humane teaching methods in veterinary education, including time and cost savings, enhanced potential for customisation and repeatability of learning exercises, increased student confidence and satisfaction, increased compliance with animal use legislation, elimination of objections to the use of purpose-killed animals, and integration of clinical perspectives and ethics early within curricula (3).

The evidence clearly demonstrates that veterinary educators can best serve their students and animals, whilst minimising financial and time burdens, by introducing well-designed teaching methods not reliant on harmful animal use.

Nevertheless, the majority of contemporary veterinary students receive minimal, if any, formal education in animal welfare issues or critical reasoning, and are explicitly required by some of their professors to harm and kill animals during their education. These academics are seen by many students as the leaders of the veterinary profession, and the unwritten message delivered is that harming and killing healthy animals is not only condoned, but is required, in order to graduate as a veterinarian; and further, that animal welfare concerns are subservient to human interests of questionable merit.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the decreasing awareness of veterinary students of animal sentience (specifically, the hunger, pain, fear and boredom of dogs, cats and cows), over the duration of their veterinary courses (4), the decreased likelihood of fourth year students to provide analgesia when compared to second or third year students (5), and the inhibition of normal development of moral reasoning ability during the four years of veterinary school (6), have all been described in veterinary journal articles. In some cases UK students were described (4).

I believe such desensitisation-related phenomena are psychological adaptations enabling previously caring students to withstand what could otherwise be intolerable psychological stresses, resulting from requirements to harm and kill sentient creatures in the absence of overwhelming necessity.

### ***Commercial conflicts of interest***

The veterinary profession is ultimately a service industry, and is commercially reliant on clients. Unsurprisingly, therefore, veterinarians are frequently hesitant about adopting positions or actions contrary to client wishes. Examples include refusing to conduct cosmetic surgeries such as tail docking, ear cropping and dew claw removal, or to euthanize animals, in the absence of sound medical justification. Fortunately, such requests are rarer in the UK than in many other countries, and are now illegal in some cases due to the passage of animal welfare legislation such as the Animal Welfare Act (2006), and the Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (England) Regulations 2007.

## **Increasing veterinary animal welfare standards**

In order to increase animal welfare standards within the veterinary profession, at least four strategies appear warranted:

1. First, some weighting should be given to awareness of animal welfare issues, positive attitudes toward animal welfare, and critical reasoning ability, during the selection of veterinary students.
2. These foundations should be built upon during formal veterinary education, by the incorporation of animal welfare, bioethics and critical reasoning courses within veterinary curricula. The 'Concepts in Animal Welfare' syllabus created by the World Society for the Protection of Animals and University of Bristol School of Clinical Veterinary Science in 2003 (revised 2007), which is being integrated into many veterinary courses worldwide, provides an excellent example (1, 7-8).
3. The replacement of remaining harmful animal use in veterinary education with humane alternatives must be accelerated.
4. The participation of practicing veterinarians in appropriate post-graduate training should be encouraged, through the provision of continuing education credits and other formal recognition.

Examples of suitable distance learning courses include the animal welfare short course (which may be taken separately) within the Royal Veterinary College MSc. in Livestock Health and Production, the Michigan State University post-graduate course in Animal Welfare Assessment, and the Animal Welfare course available through the Cambridge e-Learning Institute.

Appropriate post-graduate qualifications for veterinarians include the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Certificate of Advanced Veterinary Practice, including the optional Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law modules; the RCVS Diploma in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law; the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists Membership and Fellowship in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics, Policy and Law; the MSc. in Animals and Public Policy at the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine; and the MSc. in Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare at the University of Edinburgh.

## **Conclusions**

Such initiatives could all be expected to increase animal welfare standards within the veterinary profession, with the result that the profession might someday become a leader — rather than a follower — of evolving social standards on animal welfare issues, as expected by society, and implied by statements within veterinary Guides to Professional Conduct (9).

We have always had the ability to champion animal causes, such as those of pedigree dogs. On that issue, at last, we have found our voice. Yet, how many other animals suffer in farms, laboratories, pet stores and homes, while we keep silent, held back by concerns about adopting 'controversial' positions that have not yet achieved popular support?

The benefits of ethical positions on animal use issues are under-appreciated by veterinarians. Social attitudes toward animal welfare are constantly improving, and veterinarians who prominently advocate for animals may increase community awareness and positive perceptions of themselves and their practices, which can be good for business.

More importantly, however, advocating for animals at large can be fundamentally rewarding in a way that assisting individual animals and their guardians can not. Our words on animal

issues carry weight, and with that power comes the privilege — indeed, some would argue, the responsibility — to use it for purposes greater than personal gain. Only then will we truly realise our potential as veterinarians, and, it might well be argued, as human beings.

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