

Working  
to make  
alternative  
tracks the  
status quo

# ALTERNATIVES

IN VETERINARY MEDICAL EDUCATION



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Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights

## Veterinary Students Making a Difference

*Refusing to Quit: Winning the Right to Conscientiously Object at Murdoch University*

*Andrew Knight is a third year veterinary student at Murdoch University in Western Australia. In his own words, he is "not a vet student who became an activist but an activist who became a vet student." Mr. Knight was the student whose campaign catalyzed animal use changes at Murdoch University. The following article chronicles this campaign and is yet another example of veterinary students making a difference for the animals.*

On November 11, 1998, Perth's Murdoch University became, to my knowledge, the first Australian university to formally allow conscientious objection by students to animal experimentation or other areas of their coursework. This victory did not come easily but followed a year-long struggle by myself as a Murdoch veterinary student.

### First Year

It all began in my first year when I was required to take a Cell Biology laboratory class in which rats were killed and their still-living intestinal segments removed and experimented on by students. The academics in charge were unsympathetic and denied me the alternative assessment I requested. I then boycotted the lab, which cost me a grade. I was, however, the first in many years to boycott anything. The controversy this stirred up eventually resulted in the entire lab being canceled in 1998, thus saving the lives of around 30 to 50 rats each year.

At one stage, I endured a fairly unpleasant meeting with two of the academics in charge. They left me with dire warnings that the Cell Biology lab was only the tip of the iceberg compared to what I would later have to face and suggested that I reevaluate my suitability for the required veterinary coursework. Their warnings

did not have the desired effect but, instead, motivated me to research the alternatives to animal use and their arguments in greater depth.

### Making preparations

I sent out urgent appeals for help to animal rights groups around the world and discovered that I was not alone. Several groups provided invaluable moral support, information, and resources. From these groups I learned that the number of humane alternatives available worldwide has grown exponentially in the last decade with a similar rise in the number of courses in which they are offered. By the end of 1998, alternative programs for students who did not wish to harm or kill animals were offered in 21 out of 31 North American veterinary colleges and were the norm in the United Kingdom's veterinary colleges.

The alternatives used in such courses include computer simulations, videos, plasticised specimens, models, and ethically-sourced cadavers. Students learn by assisting with surgery on patients who actually benefit from the surgery versus using healthy animals who do not require the surgery and are later killed.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the hugely popular animal shelter

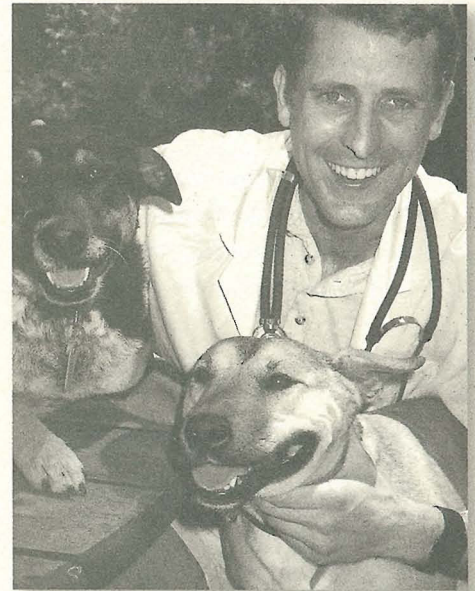


Photo by Michael Weirne

*Andrew Knight with Indy and Suzy*

sterilization programs. In these programs, homeless animals are sterilized by students under close supervision and are returned to the shelters for adoption. Adoption rates are consistently increased by these programs, and the students gain invaluable experience performing one of the most common procedures they will later perform in practice.

Clearly, I thought, it was possible to learn how to heal without learning to kill.

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## Second year

The second year labs made the first year ones look tame. Students and demonstrators killed sheep, guinea pigs, rats, toads and other animals to demonstrate scientific principles that have been established for decades. The worst were in physiology, where groups of students anesthetized sheep and experimented on them. Students cannulated arteries and veins (inserted tubes) and injected various drugs to demonstrate the effects on blood pressure. Sometimes arteries were occluded entirely. Students severed nerves to demonstrate the effects on heart rate, and forced their victims to breathe various gases to demonstrate the effects on respiration. One procedure involved occluding the air supply entirely. At the end of all these experiments, the surviving sheep were killed by students via drug overdoses before regaining consciousness. Incredibly, one of the stated objectives to these experiments, was for students to develop a sense of responsibility for an animal under their care. The academics maintained that the labs were not desensitizing.

## Fighting and winning

The refusal of myself and a friend to participate in several of these physiology laboratories cost us marks. The physiology Unit Coordinator and the Dean refused to grant alternative assessments despite being offered details of available alternatives, information about courses around the world where they are successfully used, and many scientific studies that demonstrate that alternative students are just as competent as those who take the traditional tracks.

As a last resort, I took action through the state Equal Opportunity Commission. I

formally complained that I had been discriminated against in my education on the grounds of my beliefs, which is, in some circumstances, illegal under the WA Equal Opportunity Act (1984). Negotiations commenced and the university wisely decided to give my marks back fairly early in the process, thus preventing a more significant legal precedent and avoiding further adverse publicity.

## Victory on the anniversary of Armistice Day

The biggest victories, however, came on November 11, 1998, when Murdoch's Academic Council unanimously adopted the recommendations of two reports that resulted from initiatives put to the Council by our student representatives. The Council resolved that:

"The University recognizes that some students may have a conscientious belief which is in conflict with teaching and/or assessment practices in one or more units in which they enroll. The University shall endeavor to make reasonable accommodations to meet such beliefs."

The second report was on animal usage in teaching throughout the university. The Council adopted its recommendation by launching a major review of the humane alternatives available in all 45 teaching units in which animals are currently used.

## The media storm

The enlightened decisions taken by the Academic Council were nothing less than historic. It was time to give the university some public praise for its decisions and get the message out to other Australian universities. In this we were hugely successful, achieving extensive TV, radio and newspaper

coverage. My final exams were underway at the time so I had the added task of juggling interviews with exams.

## Into the future

Murdoch University has led the way by formally allowing conscientious objection. It is now up to other Australian universities to follow Murdoch's example. In particular, it is up to their enlightened students and staff members to make it happen. In order to assist them, I have amassed a wealth of resources and useful contacts that I am keen to make available. I am also working on a "How-to" guide on conscientious objection for students.

If you are a student or staff member considering undertaking the issues of conscientious objection and humane alternatives at your university, then these are the sort of tools you will need. More important than any tool, however, is the determination not to quit until every option has been exhausted. This was really how we accomplished our goal at Murdoch. With determination like this, the above resources, and Murdoch's precedent, the next university should only be easier. Why not make it yours!

If you or someone you know is a student or staff member interested in campaigning for humane alternatives in your course, I have resources that can help you. Similarly, if you are able to donate towards the cost of producing and distributing these resources, please contact:

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# Accent on an Alternative....

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Zasloff, R. L. Animal alternatives in veterinary medical education. *In Vitro Toxicology* 8(2):109-111.

## Related Web Pages

<http://www.lawte.org>

[http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/Animal\\_Alternatives/main.htm](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/Animal_Alternatives/main.htm)

*Editors note: The web site*

*<http://www.lawte.org> listed above, is for Laboratory Animal Welfare Training*

*Exchange, which promotes the harmful use of nonhuman animals in research and testing. This is not endorsed by the AVAR.*

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Initiated by the UC Center for Animal Alternatives, *The Virtual Heart* was a project created by the Department of Anatomy, Physiology, and Cell Biology, and the Computer-Assisted Learning Facility at the School of Veterinary Medicine at UC Davis. The project was

funded by a grant from the Bayer Corporation and the Berkeley Citizens Humane Commission, and major support from the School of Veterinary Medicine. The production team included: Mike Guinan, Dave Magliano, Rick Hayes, Don Preisler, Robert Harris, Bob Parmelee, and Dan Mitchell. Dr. Dallas Hyde and Dr. Kent Pinkerton served as content consultants, with content contributions from Dr. William Thomas.