

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

### University of Illinois Takes a Positive Step Toward Alternatives

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#### Conscientious Objection

Upon entering veterinary school in the fall of 1998, I naively expected that any animal subjects used in the curriculum would be treated humanely and would survive the experience. However, within the second week of school, I was told to terminate the life of a healthy pig in order to learn some very basic aspects of renal physiology. I soon discovered that over 100 animals' lives (pigs, dogs, rats, and rabbits) are taken each year in the first-year physiology curriculum at the University of Illinois, and that students requesting alternatives to the labs were denied. I was shocked at the enormous scale of animal death and disillusioned that my future profession promoted this. My experience in those first few weeks of vet school sparked a one-and-a-half-year-long multi-student effort to find a solution for future students who objected to the labs.

I worked hard with other students to persuade the administration of the educational, cost-effective, and humane benefits of alternative educational tools. Our hard work paid off in recent months. The terminal labs were suspended upon further investigation of their validity and an official college policy was passed which

requires professors to provide alternatives for students with objections to terminal animal procedures or surgeries in their veterinary curriculum.

#### A Scientific Approach

When we started the push for alternatives, we soon found that the debate over animal use in veterinary medical education depends as much on scientific argument as ethics. To this end, I sought scientific research to support our push for the implementation of alternatives. Last December, I provided the physiology faculty with 28 largely peer-reviewed articles in journals that conclude alternatives provide equal or superior teaching efficacy as compared to terminal animal labs. These articles were from journals with stringent requirements for publication, including: the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, the *Journal of the American Physiological Society*, and the *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*.

Two other students and I also organized a survey of the Illinois veterinary students last fall. With help from key faculty and administrators within the college and professional survey composers from the university, we drafted an unbiased survey instrument. Of the 295 surveys returned, 13% of students reportedly did not participate in the terminal physiology labs, despite being offered no alternative. Of the students who *did* participate, only 20% felt they received "great benefit" from the labs in understanding physiology. A full 24% of the participating students stated they received "no benefit" from these labs in understanding physiology. Clearly, the labs were not effectively

teaching principles of physiology—as reported by the students themselves!

#### A Search for Alternatives

Last semester, a group of first-, second-, and third-year students decided to search the educational alternative databases *ourselves*. We used the AVAR Alternatives Database (accessed through AVAR's home page at [AVAR.org](http://AVAR.org)) and the NORINA Database of Alternatives (<http://oslovet.veths.no/NORINA/>) most extensively. We came up with *over 200* alternatives that either met the learning objectives directly, or in concert with another alternative could address all of the learning objectives (and then some) without loss of animal life. This amazing compilation was given to Dr. Ted Valli, Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, and the physiology faculty last December.

Unfortunately, the response to our research was very poor. Dr. David Gross, head of the Veterinary Biosciences Department, commented in our student daily newspaper, "We don't think any of these so-called alternatives are of equal

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learning experiences." Dean Valli reflected the same attitude, "There are no alternatives of equivalent teaching value." Clearly, after years of effort within the college and a more intense research effort in the past few months, this issue needed to be aired in the public forum in order to effect a lasting positive change in the curriculum.

### **Media Coverage**

I can tell you *no one* at the college was pleased to see the *Chicago Tribune* front-page article, "Vet Students Oppose U. of I. Animal Killings" (1/4/00). To me, it represented a failure on the part of our college to respond appropriately to students' concerns for alternatives to the terminal use of animals in the veterinary curriculum; ironically, the reasonable and scientifically sound arguments of the conscientiously objecting vet students were reduced to a sensationalistic news article. To many faculty, administrators, and students, this story's representation of the labs was very upsetting.

What resulted, however, was a dozen years of progress in the span of ten days. On Jan. 14th, Dean Valli distributed a memo to the college detailing the events in progress at the college, including the suspension of the terminal animal labs, a halt on obtaining animals from Class B dealers, main campus allocation of funds for alternatives, the Courses and Curriculum Committee's sponsorship of an Animal Usage Policy allowing for conscientious objection in the veterinary curriculum, and a call for "zero-tolerance" of harassment. Dean Valli noted of the conscientious objectors, "Their efforts have played an important

role in the process of helping us reassess the best way to provide them with a quality education."

On-line articles and letters to the editor on this issue have been compiled at: <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/~aehill/animal.ue.html>.

### **College Policy Allows for Conscientious Objection**

In February, with an overwhelming majority vote, the college faculty passed an Animal Usage Policy, which, for the first time, officially allows for student nonparticipation in "demonstrations or invasive procedures performed solely for instructional purposes which conclude with the death or euthanasia for the animal." This policy further states, "The instructor will provide alternatives that may be substituted for animal experiences for those students seeking alternatives." The passage of this college policy was an important step after years of effort on the part of multitudes of veterinary students seeking a more humane education. College faculty are being motivated to find noninvasive and non-terminal methods of training veterinary students without forfeiting the "hands-on experience" necessary to make skilled veterinarians.

### **Hands-on Experience**

A common misconception of alternatives is that animal laboratories must be replaced only with computer programs or other technologies. Every veterinary student wants to gain as much hands-on experience as possible in vet school, so we faced some resentment from fellow students who felt their opportunity for hands-on experience had been taken

away by our efforts. On the contrary, many alternative labs in veterinary schools can and *do* incorporate live animals. For example, physiological principles can be demonstrated on dogs with noninvasive (e.g., ultrasound) and non-terminal (e.g., chemistry blood panels) techniques. The students gain hands-on experience, and the dogs survive the day.

In addition, students have several opportunities to gain valuable hands-on experience through volunteer programs: Community Practice Services with Dr. Kent Davis, the Wildlife Medical Clinic, Equine ICU, and an extension program with the local humane society. Junior year includes small animal surgery (entirely "alternative"), large animal surgery, clinical laboratory practice, and interaction with hospitalized animals. Fourth-year is 12 months of clinical rotations, as always. Clearly, concerns that Illinois students will graduate incompetent for lack of 18 hours (six 3-hour labs) of terminal animal labs are unfounded.

### **In Conclusion**

All in all, we've discovered that our voices and actions can make a valuable impact on our profession, our education, and the treatment of animals. I encourage all veterinary students to get involved in these issues *now*. Find an issue that instills passion within you, do your research, and present your arguments scientifically and professionally. You will learn a lot about expressing yourself in a political world; you will hopefully avoid disillusionment in your pursuits; and you will definitely make a difference for the animals.

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## **Tufts University Terminates Terminal Surgeries**

In February, Tufts University, School of Veterinary Medicine (TUSVM), announced plans to eliminate, in the upcoming academic year, the surgery elective which involves the killing of dogs at the end of the surgical procedures. TUSVM will be the first veterinary school in the United States to eliminate *all* terminal procedures (for all species) in their curriculum.

In a joint press release from TUSVM and the New England Anti-Vivisection Society, Dr. Gary Patronek, head of

Tufts' Center for Animals and Public Policy, was quoted as saying, "This step is the culmination of a series of efforts since 1989 to provide top quality veterinary surgical training while at the same time promoting the humane treatment of animals." Patronek added, "By increasing surgical opportunities at area shelters and our own spay/neuter clinic, we are able to provide students with a challenging surgical experience that builds confidence and provides an excellent way of learning the

fundamentals of good surgical technique. After a period of evaluation, Tufts has found no distinguishable difference in the skill-level between students who have or have not taken the elective surgical lab. This has been supported through post-graduate employer feedback," he said.

AVAR commends TUSVM for taking this positive step forward. We hope that other veterinary medical schools will follow their lead.