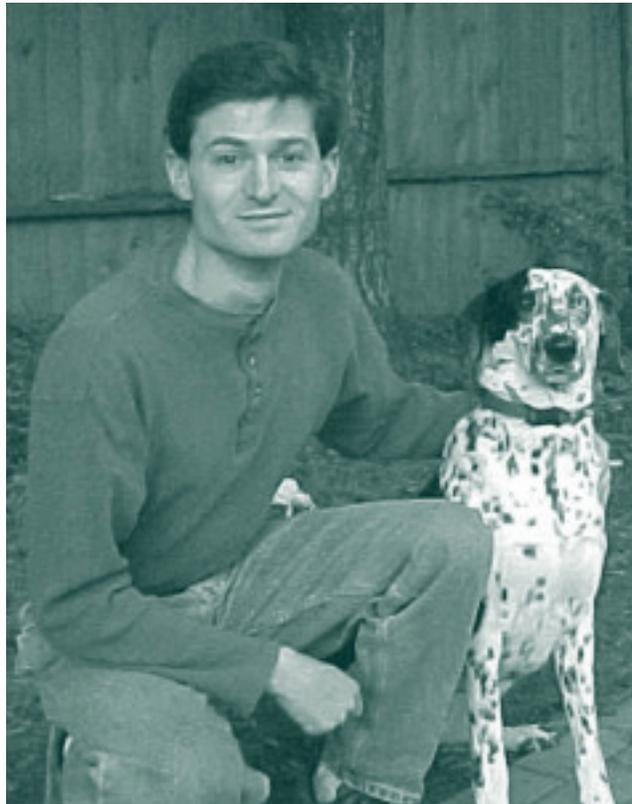


Veterinary Students I

Facing and Dealing With Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary Education

Colin Chaves, a third-year student at the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine (VMRCVM), discusses the ethical dilemmas that many students must face and deal with throughout their veterinary education. As an "alternative" student (i.e., a student who chooses an educational track that is different from the standard track and which does not involve the harming or killing of animals), he has been able to pursue his education without compromising his training while at the same time keeping his ethics intact.



Colin Chaves and his dog Marley. Marley was previously used for palpation exercises in the first-year anatomy course at the VMRCVM. Mr. Chaves is very proud to be her guardian and claims that she is the 'Best Dog in the World'.

I am writing this article despite the fact that I often do not know if I am a "veterinary student making a difference" and doing so at a time of my studies that is perhaps the most difficult. However, it is a good thing for the students to have a forum such as this to discuss matters related to veterinary education, whether they are triumphs or crises.

The most important thing I could say to any student who questions the harmful use of animals in education – especially when the animals are terminated – is that you are not alone, that there are *always* alternatives, and that support for the emotional upheaval the situation will cause is available if you desire it.

I confess to having been fairly naive regarding the condition and requirements of veterinary education when I came to study in Blacksburg, Virginia. I assumed that I was coming to a place where the animal, that is the patient, always had top priority. My desire was to learn how to be a healer of animals. I had heard the phrase "terminal surgeries" before but never really understood what this entailed. I did have some vague notion of surgeries that by their very nature must require the death of the patient. When I truly got around to thinking this through, however, the ridiculousness of it became clear to me. Why would someone perform a surgery

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with the intention of killing the patient? This is how one learns about healing? I could not fully comprehend this method of teaching. I often compare myself with students going through human medical school, as do our instructors. I think this is an excellent concept, as veterinary medicine has much to learn from human medicine (and vice versa). I wonder what it would be like if medical students were informed that they would be performing terminal surgeries on people. Obviously, there would be outrage. Both human medical and veterinary medical students are going to school to learn how to heal—not to harm.

This led me through the entire thought process that so many of us students go through: concern about the source of the animals that are used for surgical and other areas of veterinary instruction and the attempted justification so often made that “they are just going to die anyway.” The arguments against this attempted justification are manifold, but I do not intend this article to be an attempt to convince anyone of my beliefs. This article is for those who feel the same dismay as I do at the thought of killing as a means of learning. Suffice it to say that I have come to realize that taking advantage of the pet overpopulation crisis in the United States does not speak well of our profession.

When the time came for my classmates and I to make the decision as to whether we would perform terminal surgeries in our third year of veterinary school, there was no ambivalence in my mind. By that time, despite everything that was going on around me, I had reaffirmed the belief that I came to vet school with: Life is precious. There are only a few things in life that I know for certain, and this is one of them. Fortunately, there are alternative methods of learning

veterinary skills, such as surgery, which do not require the killing of healthy, adoptable animals. To date, I have performed surgeries both on live animals (spays on animals that are recovered and then put up for adoption) and on cadavers. I am happy to say that the “alternative” surgical experience was valuable and, in some ways, even better than terminal surgeries.

Students at the VMRCVM are fortunate in that whenever terminal surgeries are performed in “core” curriculum classes, an alternative is offered to the student upon request. Unfortunately, this is not the policy in elective courses where the decision seems to be left up to the course leader. It now appears that there is a disturbing trend at the VMRCVM to take portions of the core curriculum and place them into elective courses where an alternative is not offered. This is occurring with many practical lab and surgical experiences. It is even more disturbing in light of the fact that the VMRCVM claims to have a plan to entirely remove terminal surgeries from the future curriculum.

It is this sort of situation that makes being an “alternative” student difficult. Learning the necessary skills through “alternative” methods, if provided, has been both possible and enjoyable. I do not doubt that I can become a veterinarian without compromising my beliefs, as so many before me have done. The hardship has been the emotional drain associated with choosing a different path. It has also been difficult to watch my friends and classmates becoming desensitized over time and to see my other friends, the dogs, most of whom I know individually, killed at an incredibly rapid rate. These issues are not discussed, even by those who opt out of performing terminal surgeries. Any student who

chooses the alternative track for ethical reasons is at first relieved and even grateful to have this option, and rightly so. But soon after comes the realization that so many animals are still paying for the price of education with their lives.

So what is the solution to the emotional difficulty that one goes through being an alternative student? I do not have all the answers. I learn more every week, just as much outside the classroom as in it. I know support is extremely important. Find others who feel the way you do and support each other. Contact students at other schools who also have been through this difficult situation. Establish a network, which includes veterinarians who are out in practice with a set of ethics that closely match your own. A final bit of advice is to plan in advance. I cannot stress this enough. Find out what will be occurring in the curriculum well in advance so that you are prepared to deal with any concerns that you might have. Do not be forced into rushed decisions you have not had time to contemplate. You can and will get through your veterinary education with your eyes open and ethics intact, although have no doubts that there will be some bumps along the way.

Am I a “veterinary student making a difference”? Through my choice to pursue the “alternative” track of veterinary education I feel I have made a difference in some small way and to certain animals in a very large way. Progressive changes toward the ethical use of animals in veterinary education will comprise all the small things that the public, veterinarians, and perhaps most importantly the students are doing along the way.

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