

Veterinary Students Making a Difference

New Graduate Emphasizes a Continued Need for Moral and Compassionate Veterinary Education

*Jen Thompson
University of Guelph Ontario
Veterinary College, Class of 2003*

I am a recent graduate of the Ontario Veterinary College, and I am now practicing small animal medicine in British Columbia. As you can imagine, the first year after graduation is a stressful one. The learning curve that veterinarians warn you about really is quite steep, and I am forever looking up facts in my notes and textbooks. I have discovered, however, that I have been exceptionally well-prepared for the daily challenges that I now face. I also have a deep appreciation for my professors, who armed me with knowledge and continue to assist me even now through continued correspondence.

Despite the warm feelings that I hold for the college, however, I still cannot shake off the more unpleasant memories of my veterinary school education. In particular, I am still haunted by the surgical exercises course. I remember the anguish that I felt as I witnessed needless terminal procedures and the helplessness that I experienced listening to the conflicted feelings of my colleagues who had taken the traditional program. As an alternative student, I obviously felt very strongly about the use of animals throughout the program and actively attempted to bring about change. My attempts were quite fruitless, of course, mostly because the alternative student numbers were so small. It is the lack of unity of the class that I attribute to the minimal progress in effecting revisions to the program.

While I understand the short-term reasoning behind choosing the traditional program, I cannot help but think that the decision to conform was

based on fear, which the faculty reinforced on a daily, personal level. The fear of not being adequately prepared for future employment was the most repeated answer when students were queried. The college further insisted that the source of animals arose from an infinite wellspring of disposable animals — the homeless, unadoptable mutts who 'were going to die anyway.' This argument was repeated so often that it became something of a mantra. Overnight, this phrase alone was enough to destroy moral integrity. Later, it was discovered that many of these animals had never had the chance for adoption. The sources in question were from pounds, which meant 72 hours of confinement prior to transportation to Guelph. Beagles bred for research were also frequently slipped into the program as they ran out of sources for dogs. These findings, however, did not cut any ice with the students who had capitulated. It is very hard to live with yourself, I imagine, if you entertain doubts at a late stage.

I do not mean to disparage my classmates. However, I am disappointed by their acquiescence. Many have expressed dismay or guilt over the dogs used for surgery; nevertheless felt that they did not have much of an alternative. The alternative cadaver source, after all, was not much different than the pound source, although we were assured on several occasions that at least our dogs had a prolonged adoption period. The faculty, unfortunately, was not receptive to the idea of a client donation program, also known at some institutions as an Education Memorial Program or Willed Body Donation Program. Interestingly, many classmates of mine did share with me that they would have chosen the alternative program if it meant that no

animals would be killed, but as currently there was no clear alternative source, they preferred the live surgical patient. I also collected opinions from some students in my class that many would be satisfied with cadaver surgical experience provided that there were many more spay and neuter surgeries to gain the experience of live tissue handling. It is truly unfortunate that no in-depth, formal survey has ever been conducted by the college, which would have enabled these opinions to be heard.

I take issue with a college who outwardly portrays itself a benefactor of animals while inwardly appears to care so little for life. Rather than contributing a solution to the overpopulation crisis, which plagues our country, the Ontario Veterinary College, like so many others, chooses instead to actively exploit it. The inexpensive source of education material is more appealing, it seems, than the positive publicity that could be generated from investing in rehabilitation. Imagine if veterinary colleges were to learn from these animals and then invest in their future! Who better to advocate adoption of these animals than a world-renowned veterinary college? College officials could boast of socialized, sterilized, healthy pets that had made a real contribution to the education of its veterinarians. I guarantee that funding from donations would be the result. For reference, take a good look at the contributions to animal rescue societies, which include the Humane Society of the United States and the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. As part of the public relations buildup, veterinary schools could proudly advertise spay-neuter and wellness clinics, which, as an added bonus, would prepare student veterinarians amply for the realities of daily practice.

Continued on page 5

Pound Seizure

Continued from page 1

of their lives? It is true that most of the animals who end up in shelters will die there. However, the most humane thing we can do as a society if the animal is going to be euthanized anyway is to ensure that the death is quick and humane. Putting a stressed, distressed, depressed, and scared animal on a truck and shipping that animal to another facility where he or she will be impounded for weeks to months and then be handled by strangers is not humane. Many universities claim the animals are used and killed soon after arrival; however, federal law requires that the animals be kept for five days at the university before being used in case someone is searching for a lost animal. Keep in mind that these animals are former companion animals; most are used to being in a home.

An animal doesn't have to be used for some purpose to make its life meaningful or valuable. They are all valuable just because they are who they are. As for the veterinary profession, it certainly doesn't speak well of veterinarians who deem the use of unwanted animals as necessary and acceptable for veterinary training. Instead of taking advantage of the overpopulation problem, the veterinary profession should be doing more to prevent it. Further, what will teachers and researchers do when the humane community finally resolves the overpopulation problem?

Another argument I've heard for using animals from shelters is that they didn't pass a temperament test; therefore, they couldn't be adopted. Many animals who end up in a shelter and are temperament tested are scared and are not aggressive. Some testers will fail a dog who chases a cat. Some others are prejudice against certain breeds. There is no uniformity in temperament testing and, therefore, in the claims that animals sold failed a temperament test. Further, researchers and teachers are not going to jeopardize their assistants or students with animals who will bite them. Most of the animals sold are friendly because they were former 'pets.'

Veterinary schools should strive to use sources of animals that do not include harming or killing. Surgery training can be accomplished by using animals who benefit from the surgery (e.g., spays and neuters). And, cadavers can be obtained through client donation programs. Using animals from shelters is unnecessary and should be opposed by all veterinary medical students.

Editor's note: Dr. Susan Hall is an AVAR Board Member who currently is in private practice. She worked at the Michigan Humane Society for five years and has worked with numerous animal rescuers. If you are interested in stopping pound seizure at your school, please contact the AVAR office for assistance.

Veterinary Students Making A Difference

Continued from page 4

Changes like these, however, do not happen overnight. The political and economic barriers to effecting such decisions are understandably enormous. Changes like those that I propose require energy, co-operation and foresight, not to mention capital. When faced with these realities, it becomes easy to see why the status quo remains. After all, veterinary colleges have been doing things this way for years and have never had a problem. The classes, for the majority, seem well satisfied and any dissenters can be quieted using minimal tactics.

What the classes don't fully realize, however, is that there is power in numbers. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the united class as a whole, to decide the course of their education and in turn the course of their lives. In this way, we can project ourselves as sensitive, caring veterinarians to our clients and to the general public. We have the opportunity as progressive, strong thinkers to raise the level of the profession to a new level — one that encompasses sincerity, compassion, and moral dignity.

Accent of an Alternative

Continued from page 3

Considering this, my lab partners and I made slides of the liver and were able to view the histological changes. In addition, most donors have written a personal letter to the veterinary students, often describing the animal's personality, sharing the important role that he or she played in their family, and the comfort that they receive in the knowledge that their beloved pet's body will be used to benefit the next generation of veterinarians. These personal accounts reinforce student compassion and respect for the cadavers.

Embalming generally follows the process as described by Dr. Kumar from Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine (Kumar et al. 2001 JME 28(2): 73-77). This process does not involve injecting colored latex into the arteries and veins. Although this made the vessels more difficult to distinguish, I did not feel at a disadvantage. In fact, we had to visualize and really think more about the location in order to find the artery or vein — simulating a real-life experience where arteries and veins are not color-coded. This is a similar experience reported by Tufts University's veterinary students. In addition, when it came time for the exam and injected animals were used, the vessels were that much easier to identify.

I felt I benefited from my experience with the body donation program in the small animal anatomy course. It is exciting to see this program develop and be a part of it.

Editor's note: To learn even more about willed body donation programs, go to the description of Educational Memorial Programs (listed under "Resources") on the AVAR's web site at <http://avar.org>