

Veterinary Students Making a Difference

Can students effect change in veterinary education?

Meredith Rives

University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine, Class of 2003

Stories of students' successes would surely tell you that they can. Students can promote progress and have a profound effect on the way things are done in their veterinary medical education. At the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine (UW-SVM), we have a veterinary student Ethics Club. Although the club wears many faces depending on who is contributing, this past year has been largely dedicated to animal advocacy. As president of the club, I can speak to the ideas we have proposed, our achievements, and concepts that we have developed but the benefits of which we have yet to realize. Our failures are few, and this is partly due to the pragmatism of our efforts. We rarely push the limits of our confining academic and scientific environment—and yet we still manage to bring about change and awareness at some level. The success or failure of our ideas speaks both to the level of interest held by the faculty and administration, as well as to the tenacity of the students who propose the ideas. Not a day goes by that I don't see something I want to change in my veterinary education—but I reserve my efforts for those things that support animal welfare and present modest challenges. As the old adage says so well, "Pick and chose your battles."

The Ethics Club has undertaken projects such as the placement of the school's retired blood donor cow into a large animal shelter. We thought this was a principally important move considering her nine-year tenure at the school would have otherwise ended in slaughter. Also, our club has hosted speakers on a variety of topics, such as "Ethical Considerations in Oncology Medicine," "Facing and Dealing With Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary Education," "Early-Age Sterilization for Puppies and Kittens," and the "Principles of Ethics." In



Left: Meredith Rives (far left) practices endotracheal intubation on a "K-9 Intubation Trainer" from Rescue Critters®. Right: Dr. David Brunson (in the white lab coat), anesthetologist and veterinary school professor, demonstrates endotracheal tube placement on "Critical Care Fluffy" from Rescue Critters®.

addition, we co-hosted the first annual Farm Animal Wellness Seminar in March of 2002. In the coming semester we are also providing speakers on the topics of "Cosmetic Surgical Procedures for Small Animals," "Recognizing Abuse and Neglect in Animals," and "The DVM's Role in Abuse and Neglect Cases."

One of our more significant achievements is the acquisition of Rescue Critters® Animal Training Mannikins for incorporation into the curriculum. The concept has been greeted with enthusiasm and the school will be utilizing the mannikins in a variety of student labs. In 2001, the club developed the concept of "Ethics Counselors." It stemmed from the need for students to have objective faculty with whom they could have much needed ethical discussions. The concept has not been put into action to date, but we stand by the fact that it should be done. Our latest mission is rewriting the current "Animal Use" pamphlet given to incoming students. We are in the process of developing a more comprehensive pamphlet that addresses animal use at the UW-SVM, aiming for something forthright and honest and a chance for the school to give students the information that they need and deserve.

I won't tell you that in every circumstance the Ethics Club is successful and that our efforts are always fruitful. Naturally, we meet opposition or apathy on occasion. However, this happens less frequently than one might expect. More often, we are met with understanding and

acquiescence. I know that every school is different in this respect. I also know that there is not a veterinary school that cannot afford to be better at what it does. The job of fostering students and helping them develop their personal code of ethics should be based on a dedication and commitment to animals. It should not rely on the current paradox we see—the one that says that students should be comfortable with learning to protect animals while causing them harm on the way. It is important that students represent veterinary medicine in the present and not just the future. So form a club, host speakers, create alternatives, correct unethical rhetoric, meet with professors, speak up, work for the animals and leave your mark—for the benefit of the animals!

Recently, someone asked me, "What one thing would I change about my veterinary education?" My answer was *the climate*. I would change the climate in which students learn and are educated. I would create a place where students can and do stand up for what they believe in and are received with respect and understanding. I would make veterinary medical school an island of compassion and consideration where there is comfort in caring for animals. If we all stand up and speak our minds, make changes, suggest progress, and remain ethical, we will change the climate of veterinary medical education.

Can students effect change in veterinary education? You bet they can!