

University of Guadalajara Addresses Animal Use in Education

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This past February, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Guadalajara, Mexico, to speak at a conference at the University of Guadalajara (UG). This was not just any conference – it was the first of its kind in Mexico! The “First Session on Progressive Education in the Life Sciences” was organized by a 2006 UG veterinary graduate, Dr. Sofia Ponce Partida. She decided the time was right to discuss the need for and implementation of non-harmful means of educating the next generation of veterinarians. After seven months of hard work and dedication, the conference became a reality.

It was Dr. Partida’s experiences during her education that prompted her to embark on this mission. During her six years at UG, she saw no reduction in harmful animal use in the educational system. Beginning in the first semester, veterinary students were required to harm animals. She personally had to kill a dog for anatomy class during her first few weeks at the university, an action which she describes as extremely traumatizing.

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Dr. Sofia Ponce Partida

After surveying teachers and students at her school, she was shocked at the lack of regulation of animal use. The school did not keep records of how many animals were used, for what purposes, or on how they were killed. And even more disturbing, Dr. Partida discovered that her fellow students believed they had no other choice but to kill animals for their education. The message the university was sending its students was that life was disposable, not valuable. She knew there had to be a more humane way to teach — she was determined to work for change. This ultimately led her to organize this ground-breaking conference, an international undertaking.

The list of presenters at the conference was impressive. They included Thales Trez (InterNICHE Brazil), Dr. Santiago Aja Guardiola (Veterinary Anatomy Professor, UNAM), and Lizbeth Muñoz López (InterNICHE Mexico). They gave presentations on alternatives to harmful animal use in education, most of which was relatively new information for the university’s faculty and students. One of the most touching presentations came from Dr. Partida, who discussed the harsh reality of animal use in the current educational system. She also discussed the results of her surveys on the use of animals at the UG. She found that the majority of students would use an alternative if given the choice. The problem was that many students did not know an alternative existed. As students began to learn that there were alternatives to harmful or fatal animal use, they seemed very eager to use those methods.

The conference drew roughly 100 people, which was great, considering this was the first event of this kind. It concluded with a roundtable discussion that made it clear that



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students, as well as faculty, wanted to see a change. After the conference I asked Dr. Partida what she thought would happen next.

“I strongly believe that this event was the first step into a more humane education; the impact on teachers and students was profound, and now working with the university will be easier. The objectives remain: to fully replace the harmful use of animals with humane alternatives and to validate conscientious objection. The changes will spread out into other universities in the country, and we will make sure that happens.”

Dr. Partida’s actions have already inspired others in her country. Just one week later, a second conference on the use of alternatives to harmful animal use in education was held in Mexico City, at the National University of Mexico (UNAM). This conference was just as successful, and the technical committee at the university was given a letter detailing recommendations for using alternatives when possible. According to Dr. Partida, this is a great first step. And while Dr. Partida has much work ahead of her, she will not be alone.

I arrived in Mexico unsure of what to expect. I left Mexico feeling like I was part of something special. A fire had been lit; and this was only the beginning. All because one woman had the courage and determination to stand up for what she believed was right. Sofia Ponce Partida demonstrates that one person truly can make a difference. I encourage all of you to follow her lead. Veterinary schools in the United States, as in Mexico, are progressing toward a more humane type of education, one which does not include the harmful use of animals. By working together, we, too, can ensure that this change occurs in each and every veterinary school.