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The Call for Ethics Education

by Robert D. Garrison*

Case 1: A faithful client who is also a close friend visits your clinic with an unfortunately common request: that you euthanize the litter of pups his bitch just whelped as the result of an unplanned mating. Will you a) readily comply with his request; b) grudgingly comply, rationalizing to yourself that if you don't do it, he'll ask the other veterinarian in town to do the job, or worse yet, do it himself by drowning the pups; c) ask the client if he will try to find homes for the pups first; d) take the pups and tell him that you will euthanize them later, except that you have no intention of doing so; or e) absolutely refuse to do the job?

Case 2: After recently graduating and taking a position in a mixed practice, you are called out to the country home of the local police chief to examine five dairy cows with severe diarrhea. As you examine the animals, a stranger enters the barn and asks to speak to the chief in private. Thanks to the booming voice of the stranger, you hear snatches of conversation about how 'sold' he is on raw milk and how his former source was unfairly shut down by the state health department. After the stranger leaves, you ask the chief if he is selling raw milk even when he knows it is against the law in that state. You also point out that if certain microorganisms can be isolated from the milk, he could be held responsible if any of several diseases appear in his milk-drinking customers. When you tell the chief that you have no choice but to report him to the state health authorities, he angrily threatens to spread the word about your inexperience and make sure that you'll never gain a foothold in the area. Will you a) report him as required by law; b) counter his threat by reminding him that as a law officer, he is ethically bound to follow the letter of the law and not selectively exempt himself from its enforcement; c) back down and refer the problem to your associate; d) ask the chief to drink the milk himself to prove its safety; or e) forget the whole thing — after all, the facilities look clean enough, even if the cows aren't healthy?

Case 3: As a veterinarian engaged in research at a major human medical institution, you deal with laboratory animals both in your own work and in evaluating the health of animals used by other scientists. Your institution is hosting a three-day regional meeting of laboratory animal professionals, and as a result of intensely vocal picketing by animal rights advocates outside the sessions, the issue of animal experimentation is seized upon by the local television stations as a volatile issue. Later that week, with emotions still running high, you are asked to take part in a televised panel discussion about the moral and ethical implications of animal experimentation. How will you explain your position on the issue to the satisfaction of both your institution and your own feelings?

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The aforementioned cases are fictitious, but situations similar to them happen daily in the lives of veterinarians. Anyone who thinks otherwise would be well-advised to look over 24 additional far-ranging cases and "what should you do?" options found on pp. 118–125, vol. 9, no. 3 of the *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*. (The entire issue is the proceedings of the 8th Symposium on Veterinary Medical Education, entitled "Exploring Ethical and Value Issues in Veterinary Medicine"). Veterinarians in all areas of the profession will, at one time or another, be placed in compromising situations and will be forced to deal with issues whose answers are less than black and white in composition.

Where does the veterinarian turn for answers when faced with such ethical dilemmas? They most certainly are not found in books, with the exception of those situations specifically addressed in the body of the law. The responsibility for decisions made and actions taken will ultimately rest with the veterinarian, and for that reason, he or she has nowhere to turn but within. In searching for an answer, only taking into account personal feelings is not enough, nor is deriving a purely scientific answer by filtering facts through a sieve of logical pros and cons. The veterinarian must walk the tightrope between what the logical head and less-than-logical heart say to do, and grossly understated, this is not easy. The Code of Ethics adopted by the AVMA is of little help. To be sure, the Code does have a purpose; namely, to provide a framework for decision-making, but most situations that evoke the aforementioned head-heart struggle manage to fall neatly in the cracks.

Ethics education can play a dual role in the training of veterinarians. First, it can demonstrate to students that, someday, they will be forced to take positions on issues that do not lend themselves to open and shut reasoning. Second, it can prod students into examining their own attitudes and feelings on such issues while they are still insulated from the "real world" of private practice and other professional options. That Iowa State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, the oldest such institution in the country, does not include ethics as part of its curriculum greatly disappoints and frustrates me. Our graduates, faculty and facilities are known and respected throughout the United States, yet we fail to provide even an elective course designed to spur critical thinking and values analysis on what are rapidly becoming controversial issues. Mention subtherapeutic feeding of antibiotics, pound-seizure laws or leg-hold trapping at any assembly of mixed-interest lay people and the fireworks will doubtless begin. The increased exposure of such hot issues, combined with the fact that biomedical science, including our profession, relies heavily on the use of animals in research and teaching, means that a veterinary student or veterinarian who cannot formulate and defend well-thought-out positions on these and other nagging questions is going to be in trouble.

The goal of veterinary ethics education can seem misleading. The teaching of ethics does not in any way represent the imposition of certain ideas or moral judgements, i.e. what to think. For example, an unfortunately common misconception among students and veterinarians alike is that veterinary ethics is synonymous with promotion of animal welfare/animal rights and that those who express interest in discussing ethical issues are instead trying to camouflage their welfare/rights interests under a more acceptable title. Nothing could be further from the truth. The subject of animal welfare/animal rights frequently is included in discussion of ethical questions because it is one of the more inflammatory issues facing our profession, but by no means is it the only or the most pressing problem. Rather than teaching what to think, veterinary ethics education teaches students HOW to think by enlightening them with the concept that it takes more than a knowledge of concrete medical facts to be a veterinarian. For instance, one must consider the emotional attachments of owners to an animal, the confidentiality of medical information, the public health implications if certain actions are (or are not) taken, the responsibility of our profession in client education, etc. To stir students into deciding that it's time to develop some opinions, I can think of few better ways than to challenge them with well-informed lecturers who present widely disparate points of view and who catalyze some good, old-fashioned debate. Such a method of teaching, called the advocate/antagonist role-playing method, has been highly successful in teaching veterinary ethics at Colorado State University. Two instructors take opposing and
purposely exaggerated positions on issues in order to provoke student discussion. The method works well, according to Drs. Harry Gorman and Bernie Rollin, because students are less reluctant to speak out when they have the backing of one of the professors, regardless of the position taken. Also, Drs. Gorman and Rollin note that adopting such exaggerated positions makes students angry enough, in some cases, that they forget their hesitation to speak out in a class discussion.

Two of the more prevalent and fallacious arguments against adding ethics courses to our core curriculum are: 1) it's impossible to teach someone to be ethical; and 2) there isn't room in the curriculum for such courses. The first argument is succinctly laid to rest in the preceding paragraph. Ethics education does not declare one set of opinions as morally superior to the exclusion of all others. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Teaching of ethics develops the critical thought process, aids students in systematically exploring issues and prods them into developing opinions on these questions.

The second argument, that the curriculum is already overloaded and that students have not time for more coursework, is hollow, to say the least. In addressing this viewpoint, the comments of Dr. E.D. Pellegrino, a physician and president of the Catholic University of America, seem appropriate:

“A corollary of curricular inertia is the objection that there is not enough time. The curriculum is already too packed, it is said, and this becomes the justification for rejecting any new proposal. Yet, if there is a crying need in medical curricula, it is to unpack them, to reduce their redundancy and to open the way for critical reflection, synthesis and digestion of what is taught. Specifically, it is objected that putting time into the teaching of ethics will take time from teaching scientific data. This objection ignores the fact that there is already too much factual material in the curriculum and not enough time for critical reflection on that material. It ignores, too, the fact that skills in ethical analysis are as important in many clinical decisions as factual knowledge.”

Dr. Pellegrino's comments echo the lamentations of numerous students and instructors in our College. Offering an ethics course on an initially elective basis could serve as a barometer of interest in our College of Veterinary Medicine and most definitely would not take time away from the teaching of scientific “fact” courses. After considering this, and reflecting upon how the ethical quandaries faced by veterinarians are so inseparably enmeshed with day-to-day human relations, the argument that there isn't time for ethics courses certainly seems lacking.

Veterinary ethics should become a standard part of our curriculum at Iowa State University. We live in a world that grows more complex by the day, and releasing into this world veterinarians who are unable to think analytically and critically on major issues facing the profession certainly will not help our cause. To quote Dr. Hyran Kitchen of the University of Tennessee's College of Veterinary Medicine, “It is not as important that we as a profession agree on right or wrong, yes or no, as it is for us to understand the principles upon which ethical decisions are based and the consistency necessary to establish credibility. Without credibility and the subsequent trust, our profession will fade and will only provide a service dependent upon the whims of society.”

REFERENCES