

# SVME Newsletter

Newsletter of the Society for Veterinary Medical Ethics

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## *President's Message*

*Dear SVME Members,*

Time has passed too quickly, as it always seems to be doing these days, and my term as president is coming to an end. I have learned a lot from the list serve discussions and I was particularly encouraged by the student essay contest response. It is apparent that there are a lot of very bright and thoughtful people entering or affiliated with the veterinary profession who will make great contributions to the care and welfare of animals, their owners and society in the coming years. The winning essay is well worth the read (an easy thing to do) and you will find it printed in this Newsletter as well as on the SVME website.

I hope many of you are planning on attending the Hawaii meeting - I would like to put some faces to the names and voices that I have heard over the past few years. The SVME program in Hawaii promises to be an interesting one. I have enjoyed this year, especially working with the dedicated individuals on this board who have very busy careers and still make the time to contribute to SVME. I would like to thank the members of the board (Anna, Carol, Earl, Francois, Gary and John) for their time and effort through this year. See you in Hawaii!

*Cheers to you all,*

*Barb Horney DVM, PhD, Dip ACVP*  
*SVME President*

## Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer's and Membership Committee Report is a combined report because the SVME treasurer is chair of the membership committee. As of May 26, 2006, the checking account balance was \$831.38. The savings account balance was \$12,871.17. We also hold a \$10,000.00, 12 month, Certificate of Deposit.

I had the opportunity to co-staff a booth at The Student AVMA meeting in Minneapolis, MN on March 9 – 11. The American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians, and SVME collaboratively sponsored this booth. I was left with the impression that veterinary students sincerely care about ethical issues affecting the relationship between people, animals, and their environment. It was an interesting, and fun experience for me. I'm anxious to staff a booth for SVME, and AAH-ABV at the SAVMA meeting next year in Raleigh, NC.

Though our membership numbers are stable, more members are desirable to further promote dialogue in veterinary medical ethics. Your membership helps support The SVME Student Essay Award Contest, and The Robert R. Shomer Award for Outstanding Contributions to Veterinary Medical Ethics, which was presented to Dr. Carl Osborne at the AVMA meeting last year. I hope you will be present when this award is presented to another deserving candidate this year following our education programming at the AVMA meeting in Hawaii.

We would like your help in promotion, and recruitment of new members. Feel free to contact me if you would like to have SVME brochures with application forms sent to you at [wright008@umn.edu](mailto:wright008@umn.edu), or:

John S. Wright, DVM, Veterinary Clinical Sciences Dept., College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Minnesota, C339 Veterinary Medical Center, 1352 Boyd Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108.

As always, the SVME membership committee and Executive Board welcomes, and encourages constructive criticism, and suggestions that members think will help SVME serve your needs for the promotion of dialogue relative to ethics in veterinary medical practice, and other areas of veterinary medical endeavors. Thanks to all of you for your membership in SVME, and please continue to promote the concept of ethical behavior among your colleagues and students.

*Respectfully submitted, John S. Wright, DVM  
SVME Treasurer and Membership Committee Chair*

## Secretary/Newsletter Editor's Message

This year has been an exciting one for the SVME. As the Secretary of the Society, I have had the honour of also chairing the Awards Committee. Last year we initiated the Robert R. Shomer Award and the recipient of this year's award is another legend in the field of veterinary ethics. Do not miss out on the award presentation following the ethics tract July 15, 2006 at the AVMA convention.

The SVME also started the SVME Student Essay Award with this year's theme "The Use of Animals in Veterinary Medical Education". We received over 100 entries from both the US and the UK. I personally read all of the essays. Students presented some very thought provoking ideas and I wish to commend everyone who entered. I am pleased that the profession will be in the hands of these keen and thoughtful future veterinarians. The recipient of the SVME Student Award for 2006 is Gwendolen Reyes-Illg. To recognize her achievement in this outstanding paper, Ms. Reyes-Illg received a certificate and a cash award of \$500.00. Her essay follows. I look forward to next year's contest. If you have any suggestions for an essay theme, please do not hesitate to contact me at [camorgan@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:camorgan@interchange.ubc.ca).

Another responsibility of the SVME Secretary is producing and editing the SVME Newsletter. Obtaining material for the newsletter is sometimes challenging. I would encourage all SVME members to consider submitting ideas for the newsletter or even writing an article pertaining to the vast field of veterinary ethics.

*Respectfully submitted, Carol Morgan DVM  
SVME Secretary, Newsletter Editor, Awards Committee Chair*

## SVME Student Essay Award

### Animals in Veterinary Medical Education: Increasing Coherence between Principles and Practice By Gwendolen Reyes-Illg

#### Introduction

In a society faced with the ethical issues surrounding human interactions with other animals, the question of what role animals should play in veterinary education deserves exploration.

Veterinarians are doctors, diagnosticians, surgeons; they are also considered authorities when it comes to the ethical treatment of animals. Veterinary education aims to develop competent veterinarians. Ethics is a necessary component of that education since veterinarians must balance the interests of humans with those of other animals. After all, veterinarians are in the unique position of "serving two masters": their patient, the animal whose health and well-being is at stake, and their client, who pays the bills and makes the medical decisions.

Central to learning to strike this balance is how we, as students, relate to animals as we earn our DVM degrees. As we learn to heal animals, is it morally acceptable to treat animals detrimentally? What qualifies as detrimental? We must consider how our interactions with animals in veterinary school will shape us in answering. As veterinarians, what is our moral role? This is a weighty issue for the next generation of "authority figures" on animal ethics.

In this essay, I articulate my views on these issues, basing my arguments on the coherence theory of ethical justification. I present contrary viewpoints and explain my disagreement with them. Most comments apply to animal use in general. I also offer the lessons I learned through developing the willed body program for large animals at my school. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important discourse.

*Gwendy Reyes-Illg is currently a sophomore attending the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Florida (UF). She earned a B.S. in Zoology from UF in 2002 and became a License Massage Therapist at the Florida School of Massage in 2004. Her pursuit of veterinary medicine is motivated, in part, by an interest in animal rights and other social justice causes. Gwendy has interned at the Center for Great Apes and created an environmental enrichment program for the pigs living in the UF Swine Unit. Most recently, Gwendy developed the Willed Body Program for large animals at her school. She is dedicated to veterinary and humanitarian work, especially through chimpanzee sanctuaries, and following graduation she plans to pursue this interest in Africa. One day, Gwendy plans to found a unique animal sanctuary encompassing holistic veterinary medical research, veterinary-based animal advocacy with a global perspective, and educational opportunities for vet students.*

#### The Coherence Model of Ethical Justification

I assume that readers are convinced of the validity of ethics as a discipline and of its fundamental role in informing medicine, science, and other aspects of our lives. I begin with this, because I sometimes encounter the argument that moral principles cannot be "proven" in the same way as scientific ones and therefore are merely matters of personal preference. Interested readers are referred to Rollin, who argues convincingly that science, knowledge, and biomedicine rest upon philosophical positions intertwined with moral valuational assumptions (1).

Many different perspectives on ethical justification could be used to approach the issue of animal use in veterinary education. The model I use here is coherence theory, advanced most notably by Rawls and expounded by DeGrazia (2,3).

The coherence model of ethical justification resembles the processes we use in making moral decisions in our daily lives. Unlike foundational theories (e.g., utilitarianism or rights theory), the coherence model does not claim that all justification is based on one or more ethical principles, such as "maximizing good consequences" or "respecting rights." Under the coherence model, such foundations play a role in ethical justification. However, particular ethical judgments in specific cases also have a role in helping to identify more general ethical principles.

In the coherence model, judgments at any level of generalness/specificity can be used to revise judgments at any other level. The first step in settling conflicts between competing claims is to scrutinize one's initial judgments for factual accuracy and hidden bias. Judgments that withstand such scrutiny are further revised (for example, by making them more specific) in order to increase coherence in one's system of ethical convictions.

"Coherence" encompasses a variety of concepts. It entails logical consistency and argumentative support (i.e., criteria must be relevant rather than arbitrary). It also encompasses a quality termed "global illumination" – the parts of a coherent belief system must hang together in a harmonious way, rather than being disjointed or unconnected. If different moral principles apply to different situations, the reason(s) for this must be made clear.

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The coherence model is useful for veterinary medical ethics in part because it bears a resemblance to science, the foundation of much of veterinary medicine. In science, the process of scientific inquiry is never finished; higher degrees of clarity are always pursued. Similarly, under the coherence model, the process of moral inquiry is never finished. New problems, information, and insights lead to the questioning of old judgments. Rather than relying on a static, "rationally necessary" theory, moral reasoning will change over time.

Furthermore, the model is appealing because of its pragmatism. Rather than seeking a "God's eye view" of morality or dealing in abstract notions only relevant in the world of ideas, it is concerned with the real-world applications of its conclusions. As such, the coherence model can be a useful tool to explore the ethical problems that arise in veterinary medicine.

### **Application of Coherence Theory to Veterinary Medicine**

My position is that veterinary medicine should be taught in such a way that the animals who participate in students' instruction either benefit from the experience or are at least not harmed (meaning hurt, deprived, or killed). While animals do serve as learning tools for us (just as fellow humans serve as learning tools for medical students), we ought to treat them not only as a means to our edification, but as ends in and of themselves. This entails consideration and respect for the physical and psychological well-being of every teaching animal with whom we interact and a willingness to put their needs first. An essential goal of veterinary education, in training highly competent veterinarians, should be to create and embrace learning options within these moral parameters.

Overall, veterinary schools are moving in this direction. In maintaining these principles, the ideal veterinary curriculum would avoid the following:

- terminal surgeries or recovery surgeries that do not benefit the animal
- dissection of cadavers from animals other than those who died naturally or were euthanized for medical or humane reasons
- the repeated use of animals for procedures that cause them discomfort and/or distress without benefiting them
- the long-term confinement of teaching animals

In applying coherence theory to this discussion, the viewpoint that these activities are morally justifiable is considered an initial judgment. After all, these are common practices in veterinary education, which are often accepted without serious questioning by students and faculty. Some broad ethical principles that could be arrived at by generalizing these initial judgments include:

*Harming (by hurting, depriving, or killing) animals in the course of educating students is morally justified.*

*Animals used in teaching may be treated merely as a means to an end.*

*The interests of students in pursuing their education deserve greater moral weight than the interests of animals in avoiding physical and psychological harm (discomfort/distress, deprivation, and death).*

*As these uses of animals are not morally objectionable, there is no strong impetus to devise alternatives to them.*

These principles are sometimes defended by appealing to certain foundational principles (e.g., utilitarianism). These arguments are considered below. However, first I highlight some specific values articulated by the veterinary community as fundamental to its moral position. The above practices and the principles they entail are incompatible with these values.

First is a mandate codified in the resource manual of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) (4). It is the first guideline on Professional Behavior:

*Veterinarians should first consider the needs of the patient.*

Next, I draw upon my first class of my first day in veterinary school. The first page of the notes was entitled "13

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Characteristics of Effective Veterinarians”(5). This list was compiled by the AVMA and all the veterinary schools. Characteristics include:

*Compassion for people and animals and a reverence for life*

*Personal integrity and high ethical standards*

A final principle, often communicated by my instructors, is becoming more integral to veterinary medicine as the profession moves away from the “mechanic” model and toward the “physician” model (6). It is a precept taught to all medical students, the Latin phrase:

*Primum non nocere, or First, do not harm.*

Woven together, these four tenets comprise the moral fabric of our profession, specifically guiding our interactions with animals.

Most striking about these values is the clear implication that they apply to all sentient animals. There is no distinction between “owned” and “unowned” animals or between animals of high or low economic value. *All* patients deserve to have their needs considered first. *Every* animal deserves compassion. *Every* life deserves reverence.

This lack of exceptions exists because of the difficulty of defending such distinctions. For example, if it is morally wrong to do an unnecessary surgery on an animal in the context of a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCP), then one must identify a morally relevant difference if one wishes to defend the moral correctness of subjecting an animal to an unnecessary surgery in a different context. While the VCP relationship carries moral weight that is relevant in some circumstances, reflection reveals that this is not the source of the “wrongness” in the former scenario. The “wrongness” of harming an animal in this way has its root in the animal’s own experience, which is unaffected by factors such as being “owned” or having a VPC relationship.

A second implication is that animals are more than means to human ends; they are ends in and of themselves. If veterinary medicine accepted the treatment of animals as merely a means to an end, the first principle cited would read, “First, consider the needs of the client,” or “First, consider your own needs.” Veterinarians would be encouraged to cultivate “a reverence for life that serves some useful purpose.” The core principles are not so worded. However, when healthy animals are destroyed to provide cadavers for dissection, they are treated as no more than a means to an end. Here, we put our needs first, disregarding the animals’ fundamental interest in avoiding death. We reduce animals to the status of instruments and withhold from them the respect with which veterinarians are expected to treat their patients.

When students’ moral relationships with teaching animals differ markedly from veterinarians’ moral relationships with their patients, the goal of developing veterinarians with high ethical standards may be compromised. Students are alienated from the moral principles veterinarians are expected to uphold. This promotes “compartmentalization,” i.e., having one set of ethical standards for one group and a different set for another group. In the absence of a morally relevant difference, such a belief system lacks coherence and falls short of the goal of high ethical standards. Furthermore, the strong resistance often encountered by students who conscientiously object to certain uses of animals imparts an unspoken lesson: abandon your moral principles if they run counter to your career goals or to commonly accepted practices. This undermines the cultivation of personal integrity in future veterinarians.

Finally, as the treatment and moral status of animals becomes more important to society, so does the duty of veterinarians to ensure the ethical treatment of animals (7). This role necessitates a strong foundation in ethics. Two studies suggest that something about the veterinary curriculum may inhibit students’ moral development and decrease their level of empathy toward animals (8,9). A valid explanation for this may be that, throughout their education, students are expected to accept the incoherent ethical position engendered by their detrimental use of animals. If so, detrimental animal use in education may be detracting from veterinarians’ ability to fulfill their societal obligation.

### **Challenges to this Argument and Rebuttal**

A common argument against my position is that developing competent veterinarians without the detrimental use of animals is not possible. Because an incompetent veterinarian can do harm to many patients and clients, utilitarian considerations justify practices such as dissecting cadavers of healthy animals, terminal surgeries, etc.

For example, should I perform my first splenectomy on an acutely ill patient or should I first practice this and

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several other major surgeries during a terminal surgery? Presumably, my first attempt at a major surgery may involve complications. According to this argument, the negative consequences in the former situation, where my patient may endure complications like peritonitis and my client may suffer financial and emotional loss, are worse than those in the latter situation, where the painless death of one "unowned" animal allows me to practice multiple procedures.

The main problem with this argument is its confusion about what "alternatives to detrimental animal use" entail. It presumes that, without terminal surgeries, students proceed from cadaver surgeries directly to performing an entire surgery on a sick patient. Similarly, it presumes that eliminating the dissection of cadavers of healthy animals means eliminating dissection entirely. Such presumptions, if valid, would support the conclusion that eliminating detrimental animal use from the veterinary curriculum would decrease graduates' levels of competency. However, they are inaccurate.

Recent articles in the *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* reference several dozen alternatives to detrimental animal use developed by veterinary instructors (10,11). From these, a different vision is gleaned. Surgery instruction, for example, can involve a combination of:

- initial practice on autotutorials, models, and cadavers (12, 13, 14)
- sterilization surgeries for animal shelters
- medically necessary surgeries in which students, based on preparation and demonstrated skills, take part in the technical aspects of surgery to varying degrees (15,16)

When employers evaluated the competency of new graduates, they reported no significant difference between individuals who participated in such an alternative surgery program and those who participated in the conventional curriculum (17). In addition, individual students who have developed alternatives in the absence of established programs have become competent veterinarians – at least one is even a surgery instructor (18).

With regard to dissection, willd body programs can provide cadavers for dissection without the sacrifice of healthy animals (19,20). Western University College of Veterinary Medicine's "reverence for life" philosophy on animal use is implemented through such non-detrimental surgery instruction and willd body programs. This further weakens the argument that utilitarian considerations justify detrimental use of animals in veterinary education (21).

Another opposing argument holds that veterinary medicine is based on animal welfare, not animal rights; therefore, the life or well-being of an animal may be sacrificed provided this is done as humanely as possible and for some useful purpose. As veterinarians, our oath dictates that our main obligation is to society – not to individual animals – and refers specifically to "animal resources," suggesting that viewing animals as a means to an end is acceptable (22). Therefore, while it may be possible to develop curricula devoid of detrimental animal use, there is nothing morally incorrect about the present system. The inconvenience and expense of implementing alternatives is therefore unjustified.

These are valid points. These principles do seem to be as deeply rooted in veterinary medicine's ethical position as those I quoted above. Coherence theory directs us to seek a coherent belief system whose parts hang together in a harmonious way. Yet the discrepancies between these two sets of principles cannot be logically reconciled. The compartmentalization necessary to sustain both is a product of the historical development of veterinary medicine rather than that of a rationally defensible distinction.

Again we face an issue beyond the scope of this text. However, I offer the following: The animal welfare philosophy, codified in the Animal Welfare Act (23) and explicitly accepted by veterinary colleges, requires the use of alternatives to harming animals where possible. Individuals and schools which have pursued such alternatives are succeeding in training competent veterinarians. Their success strengthens my argument: that we should use and develop options that allow the teaching of veterinary medicine without harming the animals who participate in students' instruction.

### **Lessons Learned: Developing a Willd Body Program for Large Animals**

"If you want truly to understand something, try to change it" (24): This sums up my experience with the willd body program for large animals at my college. Currently in its seventh month, this program is beginning to achieve its goal of providing the Large Animal Anatomy Laboratory course with cadavers from terminally ill, suffering animals. By grounding my ethical views in pragmatism, this project helps me understand the challenges involved in pursuing new options. Since an ethical position is of no value if we are unable to implement its conclusions, I offer the lessons I have learned.

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## Animals in Veterinary Medical Education: Increasing Coherence between Principles and Practice *continued*

- Predictable and unpredictable challenges will invariably complicate the creation of new options (25). However, in the presence of an open-minded faculty, such challenges can be overcome through persistence, patience and innovation.
- The initial deviation from the status quo may be the most difficult step. Possible reasons include:
  - present system is safe and convenient while the new option is unproven and initially requires extra effort
  - faculty members are invested in the present system they have helped develop
  - introducing a new option may inadvertently draw attention to a controversial conventional method
- When developing a new option, an effective way to address resistance is to encourage involvement of affected individuals and clearly understand their perspectives and needs.
- As new options are developed, all detrimental animal use will likely not cease immediately. Gradual change occurs as a new program's ability to meet curricular needs improves. The Willd Body Program is currently reducing the number of healthy animals euthanized for dissection with the goal of eventually eliminating this practice. Even when fundamental restructuring is involved, new ways can be phased in as old ways are phased out. For example, a new option for advanced surgery instruction could initially involve only some students, allowing it to be refined before it becomes the norm.

### Conclusion

My perspective – that the animals who participate in veterinary students' instruction should benefit from or be unharmed by the experience – would have been considered radical not too long ago. However, both society and veterinary medicine are evolving higher ethical standards for the treatment of animals. The adoption of my position would make veterinary education's practices more coherent with our profession's guiding ethical principles. The changes that have already happened prove that we have in our grasp the resources to create curricula embodying our principles. The essential spark – whose potential lies in each of us – is the determination to undertake this endeavor.

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## **SVME Ethics Tract Abstracts**

Following are abstracts for the scheduled lectures at the AVMA convention,  
July 15, 2006 Hawaii Convention Center, Honolulu, Hawaii.

### ***Session 1: The Veterinarian's Oath: A Critical Review, Carol Morgan***

As a public declaration of their service to society, many professionals swear an oath upon entrance to their chosen profession. These public declarations assist professionals in understanding the importance of their role and should serve as guides in their daily practices. Oaths should assist in engendering trust in professionals by clients or patients; who are often vulnerable when seeking the assistance of a professional. Does the Veterinarian's Oath adequately guide veterinarians in serving their clients and patients? Does the Oath reflect current conceptions of the public good? This presentation will review the purpose and structure of professional oaths and explore the adequacy of the current Veterinarian's Oath to both the veterinary profession and the public.

### ***Session 2: Professionalism, Collegiality and Etiquette: A Historical Perspective, Barbara Horney,***

A brief history of the development of medical professionalism including a discussion of the intent and practice of the concepts of ethics, etiquette and social responsibility as they originated and in present-day veterinary medicine will be presented. This includes a condensed look at western medicine from Hippocrates, through guilds and academies to the self regulated medical associations of today. It is important to understand the historical issues and pressures affecting human and veterinary medical practice to understand the development of the principles of medical ethics and the present-day rules and guidelines that govern interactions with clients, patients, other professionals and society at large in these two related professions.

### ***Session 3: Latest Animal Welfare and Ethical Issues on the West Coast, Jon Klingborg***

California is a constant testing ground for animal welfare issues and debates regarding the ethical use and treatment of animals. Over the past few years, an increasing amount of the California VMA's time and energy has been spent trying to manage these types of issues.

Not only are we seeing a greater complexity in the animal welfare issues, but the tactics being used by supporters are also becoming more sophisticated. Furthermore, increased media coverage has heightened the importance of the veterinary profession as the central authority on issues of animal welfare and ethical use.

With more people getting involved in animal welfare/ethical issues and increased media coverage, it has seemed that the 'stakes' are getting higher each year. These issues can and have emerged at all levels of government—from city councils to county boards of supervisors to the state legislature. Most recently, California has been a battleground state for the Owner-Guardian debate, as well as bans on ear cropping, pet cloning, and cat declawing.



## **SVME Ethics Tract Abstracts**

### ***Session 4: Veterinary Care for Indigent Pet Owners, Bernard E. Rollin***

Anyone harboring lingering doubts that the notion of the human/animal bond is simply a public relations concept created to market pet food or veterinary services can surely no longer sustain such a view in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The unforgettable images of people asked to evacuate their homes, but unwilling to leave without their pets, are burned into the American psyche. Our bond with animals has been forged in the crucible of social change. In the past fifty years, new relationships with animals came from a variety of converging and mutually reinforcing social conditions. This bond is manifest in all strata of society, in all ethnic groups, in people of all ages, some of whom cannot afford even minimal medical care for their beloved animal companions. Yet we live in a society that does not assure medical care for all people let alone for their animals. In such a context, the issue of veterinary medical care for people in the lower economic strata of society is not even discussed as a serious issue.

While many veterinarians, to their credit, treat such animals at cost, or even for nothing, this is far too important to be left to ad hoc solutions; we need a template for an institutional approach that provides a structure that is both sustainable and clearly recognizable and findable by indigent people in need of veterinary services for their animals. Specific recommendations are made for achieving this goal, making use of both private practitioners and clinics in veterinary schools. Proposals for funding such efforts via individual, organizational, and corporate sector contributions are presented. Veterinarians must take a leadership role in making provision for helping all companion animals, not merely those whose owners can afford to pay.

### ***Session 5: Ethical Practice Management Issues Involved When Clients Can't Afford The Cost of Care, Marsha Heinke***

Private veterinary practitioners answer many masters: their profession's code of ethics and veterinary oath; local, state and federal laws; local, regional, and farther-ranging communities of man- and animal-kind; and personal belief systems.

Members of "The Caring Profession" perennially experience intense pressure to balance animal and owner welfare with the challenging reality of veterinary practice economics. Law, ethics, morals, and money amalgamate to create both responsibility and opportunity.

In a litigious society where many seek blame and perhaps a few ride, so-called "standards of care" become an ill-define ruler against which every veterinary professional will be measured. How does one serve the public good while maintaining the revenue stream to financially support sound decisions in accord with continuously changing standards and avoid taking economic shortcuts?

Based on perceived client need and moral-ethical-legal compasses, veterinarians are especially prone to random kindly acts. Because each charitable act presents a hidden financial burden, we believe it should be consciously and completely articulated.

Measure each moral, ethical, and legal practice dilemma's monetary effect. Proactively budget charitable giving of both tax-deductible and non-deductible services, while carefully abiding by current standards. Protect the practice profit margin while simultaneously communicating positive publicity to build awareness of you good deeds.

## SVME Ethics Tract Abstracts

### ***Session 6: Do Good, Do Well: A Practitioner's Experience in a "Poor" Part of Town, Brian Forsgren.***

What are the priority prerequisites to being a successful veterinarian? When did there occur a shift in our approach to life that tipped the scale of self-concept from "How can I be happy?" to "How can I get rich?" As the raising the average transaction fee becomes the benchmark and goal for veterinary economic thought, how is any care going to be available to those animals owned by low or lower middle class families? What are the factors that allow a veterinary practitioner in today's world to live up to an image and survive financially?

### ***Session 7: Legal Issues involved With Client's Inability to Pay For the Cost of Caring, Doug Jack***

Few would doubt that veterinary practitioners are, on a daily basis, faced with conflicts between their legal responsibilities and their ethical obligations. As a self-governed profession the veterinary community is subjected to a plethora of legal regulations together with the tenets of ethical beliefs, which, among other things, would generally, require the veterinary professional to render assistance to any ill or injured animal presented to him or her. One should not confuse the legal or ethical requirement to provide professional assistance with the legal right to be paid for such service - too often the veterinarian tends to equate the rendering of service with more fiscally-related issues such as accounts receivable management. The two vary widely.

Most jurisdictions throughout North America provide for both legal and ethical requirements for veterinary professionals including the requirement to provide veterinary services for those with whom the practitioner has established an appropriate "veterinary/client/patient relationship" (the "VCPR"). The relationship exists, in most states, when four factors are present: first, the veterinarian has assumed responsibility for making medical judgments for the patient; second, the client has indicated a willingness to comply with the advice provided; third, the veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the animal from either a physical examination or an appropriate history; fourth, the veterinarian is available to respond to any anticipated reaction or consequence to the agreed-upon treatment plan. Once the VCPR exists, then the veterinarian has both a legal and moral obligation to provide service until such time as the VCPR is terminated by either the client or the veterinary professional. The failure to continue to provide necessary service would, in most states, for legal purposes constitute unprofessional conduct and be the subject matter of sanctions imposed by the regulatory authorities. One might argue that the VCPR ceases to exist once the animal is presented with a different condition; however, most view the VCPR to exist until terminated.

It is interesting to note that the VCPR does not make reference to the costs associated with the provision of such services nor the manner of payment nor any suggestion relating to credit arrangements. In other words, the professional obligation to provide service exists without reference to the economic gain to be derived there from - it is, for most, no answer to say that a required service was not provided merely because the client refused to pay once the VCPR is found to exist. This is not to say that the client does not have a legal or ethical obligation to pay; rather, the important aspect of this part of the discussion is that the VCPR can exist without any corresponding obligation to pay.

To this end, so long as the VCPR can be found to exist, the veterinary practitioner must continue to provide service; thus, it is critically important for the professional to terminate those relationships which do not provide appropriate economic rewards. In most jurisdictions, this would be require that the veterinary clinic advise the client by certified mail that the veterinarian is terminating the relationship offering the client sufficient time to seek alternative veterinary care.

### ***Session 8: New Ideas For Managing The Issue of Inability to Afford The Costs of Veterinary Care Ethically & Successfully, Panel Discussion All Speakers and audience***



**Dr. Robert R. Shomer Award**  
for  
**Outstanding Achievement in Veterinary Medical Ethics**  
**Award Presentation Ceremony**

Following the Ethics Session at 5:00 PM, July 15, 2006

This award is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Robert Shomer. Dr. Shomer was a co-founder and the first President of the Society for Veterinary Medical Ethics. His intellect, courage, and eloquence are hallmarks of true leadership in the field of veterinary medical ethics.

This award is bestowed upon an individual who has made significant contributions to the field of veterinary medical ethics. The recipient for 2006 holds a distinguished career as a leader in the field of veterinary medical ethics. He is an outstanding individual, who throughout his professional career has promoted and embodied the qualities of a true professional. Please plan on attending the award ceremony following the ethics session to honor the recipient of the Dr. Robert R. Shomer Award!

***Current Officers of the Society of Veterinary Medical Ethics***

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**SVME Annual Business Meeting Notification**

**Location 324 Hawaii Convention Center**

**AVMA, Saturday, July 15, 2006**

**12:30 AM – 1:30 PM**

SVME Elections: The following slate of candidates are nominated for officers of the SVME Executive. Nominations will also be accepted from the floor.

President - Anna Worth

President-Elect - Carol Morgan

Treasurer- John Wright

Secretary- Gary Block

Historian - Diane Levitan

