President’s Message

Dear SVME Members,

Greetings to all from here in eastern Canada. I hope you all are enjoying the mild winter - I would have to say that I am disappointed at the lack of snow we are getting here. It is easier to get around on the roads, but has not been good for typical winter activities except for a few short days so far.

I have been enjoying the bursts of discussion on the list serve - there are some very thoughtful people out there and it is interesting to see the various perspectives you all bring to the topics. The discussion on the veterinary oath has left me wondering if there should be an effort to create a revised oath for the consideration of the wider veterinary community - perhaps we could discuss this as a group some time - would it be worthwhile? I thought Wendy Koch's suggested draft might be a great starting point. I asked Dr. Carl Osborne if we could reprint his commentary on the veterinarian's oath that appeared in JAVMA in June of 1991. He and the journal kindly agreed to allow this and you will find his commentary reproduced in this newsletter.

On a somewhat related topic, I have been watching with alarm the mounting number of high profile and respected scientific researchers that have admitted to fabrication and falsification of data in published articles in peer reviewed journals. While I believe that the actual number of such cases is small, it certainly re-enforces the concept of cautious skepticism when reading any scientific report!

We continue to plan for the July meeting and ethics session in conjunction with the AVMA in Hawaii. I hope to see many of you there and look forward to an interesting program.

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 February 1, 2006, the checking account balance was $1,515.77 and the savings account balance was $22,830.33.

Though our membership numbers are stable, more members are desirable in order for us to further promote dialogue in veterinary medical ethics. I would particularly like to encourage student membership in SVME. Our list-serve often contains dialogue regarding issues of concern to students, as well as others in the veterinary medical, and related professions. Also, students are encouraged to submit essays for the SVME Student Essay Award Contest, and possibly win a $500.00 prize.

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 wrigh008@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

Student Essay Contest

The Society for Veterinary Medical Ethics (SVME) is dedicated to increasing dialogue and understanding of ethical values and issues facing the veterinary profession. In order to foster and encourage future veterinarians to develop their interest in and understanding of veterinary ethics, the SVME sponsors an annual essay contest. The theme of the 2006 Essay Award is “The Use of Animals in Veterinary Medical Education”. The recipient of the award will receive a certificate of recognition, a cash prize of $500.00, and publication of his/her essay in the SVME Newsletter.

Award Deadline: March 30, 2006
For more information please visit the SVME web site http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/org_SVME/

Carol Morgan DVM
SVME Secretary, Newsletter Editor, Awards Committee Chair

Officers of the Society of Veterinary Medical Ethics

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A Guide to Moral Decision Making for Veterinarians
Carol Morgan DVM

Modified for veterinarians from the works of Michael McDonald
Available at http://www.ethics.ubc.ca/people/mcdonald/decisions.htm

1. Identify the ethical dimensions of the situation.
Look for the moral dimensions in the situation and look beyond the purely scientific or technical elements.

2. Identify all relevant parties.
Who is involved with or affected by the decision? Identify all morally relevant individuals and groups of individuals. What are their relationships? Are other ‘things’ affected by the decision (for example the environment)? Identify the decision-makers who are or ought to be involved in the process. Recognize real or potential conflicts of interest in these decision-makers

3. Consider the context.

Clinical Issues

- What is the patient’s medical history/ diagnosis/ prognosis?
  What are the goals of treatment?
- What are the probabilities of success?
- What are the plans in case of therapeutic failure?
- In sum, how can the patient be benefited by medical, nursing, or other care, and harm avoided?

Preferences

- Has the owner/caregiver been informed of benefits and risks; understood, and given consent?
- Is the owner/caregiver mentally capable and legally competent? What is the evidence of incapacity?
- How well do animals of the patient’s species generally tolerate the proposed treatment?
- How well will the patient tolerate the proposed treatment?

Quality of Life/Death

- What are the prospects, with or without treatment, for a return to the patient’s normal life?
- Are there biases that might prejudice the owner’s evaluation of the patient’s quality of life?
- What physical and mental benefits is the patient likely to experience if treatment succeeds?
- What benefits or deficits will the animal owner/caregiver experience if the treatment succeeds
- What benefits or deficits will the animal owner/caregiver experience if the treatment fails?
- Is the patient’s present or future condition such that continued life might be judged undesirable?
- What are the plans for comfort and palliative care?

Contextual Features

- What chapter is this in the patient’s life?
- Are there family/cultural issues that might influence treatment decisions?
- What is the patient's purpose or use and how might this influence decisions?
- Are there religious, cultural factors?
- Is there any justification to breach confidentiality?
- Are there problems of allocation of resources?
- What are the legal implications of treatment decisions?
A Guide to Moral Decision Making for Veterinarians continued

4. Generate a list of alternative solutions

Develop a list of alternative solutions and be creative!

5. Identify relevant ethical principles

• Respect for freedom to choose

  Autonomy: Would we be exploiting others, treating them paternalistically, or otherwise affecting them without their free and informed consent? Have promises been made?

• Respect for well being

  Non-maleficence: Will this harm patients, caregivers, or members of the general public?
  Beneficence: Is this an occasion to do good to others? Remember that we can do good by preventing or removing harms.

• Respect for the notion of fairness

  Justice: Are we treating others fairly? Do we have fair procedures? Are we producing just outcomes? Are we respecting morally significant rights and entitlements?

• Respect for the notion of virtue and maintaining trust

  Fidelity: Are we being faithful to institutional and professional roles? Are we living up to the trust relationships that we have with others.

6. Weigh the harms and the benefits.

Consider the consequences of each decision. What are the harms and benefits to each of the parties involved? What is the level of risk associated with the harms and benefits? Weigh the harms and benefits. Be careful to note how these are weighted and whether this weighting varies for the different groups or individuals?

Harms may include pain, suffering, distress, fear, boredom, frustration, injury, disease, thirst, hunger, harms to reputation, financial costs, loss of resources, etc.

Benefits may include satisfaction of preferences, happiness, pleasure, contentment, retaining and increasing resources (financial, cultural, social, etc.).

7. Consult legal and professional rules.

Veterinary medicine falls under provincial or state legislation. In addition to laws, veterinary medical associations create Oaths, Bylaws, and Codes of Ethics, which act as guides for professional behaviour. Consider seriously whether you should choose an option that is illegal or contrary to established rules. Sometimes laws and rules are not well conceived or constructed and should be broken. But in general, it is ethically important to follow laws and established rules.

8. Talk to others

Dialogue with coworkers, colleagues, employers, members of the professional association, and ethicists may be invaluable to elucidate and refine ethically important points.

9. Consider how a virtuous person would act.

How would someone you admire behave in this situation?
What would a wise person do?

10. Make the decision, live with it and learn from it.
The veterinarian's oath: Are you keeping your promise?

Carl A. Osborne, DVM, PhD

Many graduates of colleges and schools of veterinary medicine have taken the veterinarian's oath at graduation. According to a popular dictionary, an oath is a solemn declaration or affirmation. It is a promise—a vow or pledge that provides a basis for expectation. Although the veterinarian's oath is a solemn promise to uphold the principles of veterinary medical ethics, how often has repetition of the oath been only a ritual associated with graduation? How many have taken the time to carefully study its content? What promises were made? Are those promises being kept?

Veterinarian's Oath

The veterinarian's oath was first adopted by the AVMA House of Delegates in 1954; it was slightly modified in 1969. The oath was to be taken at the time of graduation by veterinary students in accord with the practice of other learned professions of the world. The oath was to be spoken in the presence of faculty and fellow graduates. The veterinarian's oath states:

Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of livestock resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.

I accept as a lifelong obligation, the continued improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.

To help answer the question about fulfilling promises contained in the veterinarian's oath, let us examine specific portions of the oath in greater detail.

Being Admitted to the Profession of Veterinary Medicine . . .

A profession literally means to profess, or to speak vows or promises. A profession has been defined as an occupation that: (1) regulates itself through systematic required education or collegial discipline; (2) has a base in technical, specialized knowledge; and (3) has a service, rather than a profit orientation, enshrined in an ethical code.

I Solemnly Swear . . .

Something that is solemn has been defined as being sacred in character. To swear in the context of an oath is to promise with great conviction or emphasis.

To Use My Scientific Knowledge and Skills . . .

Knowledge consists of familiarity with facts acquired by study, observation, or personal experience. Wisdom is the ability to properly utilize knowledge, or the intelligent application of knowledge. If we have knowledge, but are unable to apply it, we lack wisdom. Perhaps the veterinarian’s oath should be modified to state, “. . . to use my scientific knowledge, wisdom, and skill . . .”

For the Benefit Of Society . . .

Although the veterinary profession has the obligation to care for the animal kingdom, caring for animals also benefits society. Most are familiar with the cliche, “man’s best friend is the dog.” In reality, man’s best friend ought to be man. As with almost all components of the veterinarian’s oath, applying our knowledge and skills with the goal of doing unto others as we would want them to do to us will benefit society.

Because of our professional talents and skills, veterinarians have a responsibility to contribute to the well being of others, even when the contribution does not yield remuneration or prestige. Much of our professional wisdom is, after all, the result of inherited intelligence nurtured by educational institutions supported by all members of society. Hippocrates put it this way: “Sometimes give your services for nothing . . . and if there be an oppor-
tunity of serving one who is a stranger in financial straits, give full assistance to such.”

Through the Protection of Animal Health, the Relief of Animal Suffering, the Conservation of Livestock Resources, the Promotion of the Public Health . . .

Fulfillment of this portion of the oath can best be accomplished in context of doing unto others as we would have them do to us. The promise to relieve animal suffering deserves special comment. The type of animal is not mentioned; veterinarians are to respect and appreciate all forms of life. To quote a familiar theme, “We are charged with the welfare of all creatures—great and small.”

When considering the relief of suffering, we should recognize conceptual differences between sympathy, empathy, and compassion. Sympathy is defined as pity felt for another’s trouble. Empathy is defined as sharing another’s emotions or feelings. Empathy is different from and superior to sympathy. In sympathy, you feel for and give to another being. In empathy, you feel with another being, and give of yourself. Compassion encompasses sorrow for another’s suffering or trouble, and the desire to help. Although any person can express compassion, veterinarians are uniquely qualified to help. We should express compassion to living beings under our care in the form most expected of us, namely with professional competence.

And the Advancement of Medical Knowledge

By advancing our own medical knowledge, and by helping to improve the understanding that others have about veterinary medicine, we advance the profession and its benefit to the public. Dr. Donald Low, University of California, Davis, has encouraged us to strive to practice 40 to 50 years of veterinary medicine, and not one year 40 to 50 times. Dr. A. J. Kolven, JAVMA Editor-in-Chief, stated that to publish or perish primarily applies to the profession rather than the individual. In context of both of these admonitions, there is no limit to what we can do if we do not become preoccupied with desiring credit. Our motive for advancement of medical knowledge should not be personal gain or prestige. Rather, as the oath states, it should be to benefit others.

I Will Practice My Profession Conscientiously . . .

The term conscientiously contains the word conscience. Conscience is derived from the Latin term “scire,” and implies knowledge from within. Conscience has been defined as the faculty, power, or principle of a person which decides lawfulness or unlawfulness of his actions, with a compulsion to do right. Conscience consists of moral judgment that prohibits or opposes the violation of a previously recognized ethical principle. Since it is an inward realization of right or wrong that excuses or accuses various actions, conscience judges.

Conscience can be trained by thoughts, acts, convictions, and rules that are implanted in a person’s mind by study or experience. Based on this input, it makes a comparison with the course of action being contemplated or taken. When the rules and the contemplated course of action conflict, conscience sounds a warning.

Conscience tells us we ought to do right, but initially does not tell us what is right. Conscience is an unsafe guide if not trained in proper standards based on truth. One’s conscience can be so abused that it is no longer able to sound warnings and give proper guidance. Man’s conduct is then controlled by fear of exposure and punishment rather than a good conscience. I have found that a Bible-trained conscience serves best to guide our intentions so that we can act conscientiously. The ultimate test of our conscience is the conduct it dictates or inspires.

With Dignity . . .

Dignity has been defined as the quality of being worthy of esteem or honor. Although books have been written about how to act with dignity, all actions of dignity are consistent with the principle of doing unto others as you would have them do to you. The dignity of veterinarians should be measured by their conduct, not by their profession. We should frequently ask ourselves whether the motive of our conduct is based on giving or getting. Our work should be seen within the framework of what it accomplishes for others, not just in light of what it does for us in terms of salary or prestige. Albert Einstein put it this way, “Try not to be a man of success, but rather, try to become a man of value.”

And in Keeping With the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics

The word ethic is derived from the Greek word “ethos,” meaning character or custom. It implies conforming to moral standards, or conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession. Ethics are functions of intelligence. To be ethical, one must be in accord with some moral standard or code of conduct. The term moral is derived from the Latin word “moralis,” which signifies manners. Morality deals with or makes a distinction between right or wrong conduct. It implies conforming to a standard of right behavior. Synonyms for moral include the terms virtue and ethic. Law is not a synonym for morality.

The original United States Veterinary Medical Association Code of Ethics was adopted in 1867. Now, broad based and general principles of veterinary medical ethics have been adopted by the American Veterinary Medical Association. They encompass such topics as guidelines for profes-
I Accept as a Lifelong Obligation the Continued Improvement of My Professional Knowledge and Competence

By continuing to improve our knowledge and competence, we are applying the Golden Rule. The only barrier to the knowledge and wisdom that will aid us in the practice of veterinary medicine is a self-imposed one. To put new knowledge and wisdom into practice emphasizes the importance of practicality, but our commitment to practicality should not be misdirected. Practicality may be a virtue, provided that it is not used as an excuse for ignorance. To this end, the unshakeable principle that guides our actions must be the welfare of our patients first—and last.

References

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