

Foreword

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Until well into the second half of the 20th century, ethics in both human and veterinary medicine was essentially intra-professional etiquette, dealing with issues like fee-splitting, business practices, advertising. The so-called *Principles of Veterinary Ethics*, the American Veterinary Medical Association Code of Ethics, had dozens of entries on advertising and such trivialities as whether it is ethical to send Christmas cards to clients or is such practice a form of advertising, and none on euthanasia of an animal for owner convenience!

To a large extent, this is explained by the fact that until very recently, veterinary medicine was largely a handmaiden to agriculture. The animals of concern to veterinary medicine were virtually universally *agricultural animals*, whose value was weighed in economic terms. The majority of veterinarians earned their living in agricultural practice. By the 1970s, however, the demography of veterinary practice shifted dramatically to companion animals, so that currently more than 75% of veterinarians serve pet owners.

Correlatively, repeated studies by veterinary schools indicate that minimally 89% to almost 99% of companion animal owners profess to view their animals as members of the family. Veterinary medicine has grown significantly in scientific sophistication, with a proliferation of specialties and treatment modalities animal owners are willing to pay for. As early as 1980, the *Wall Street Journal* published a front-page story reporting on owners of canine cancer victims spending over six figures on treating their animals at the Colorado State University cancer clinic.

During roughly the same time period, societal concern for the welfare of animals used in all aspects of society has increased exponentially. It is easy to demonstrate the degree to which these concerns have seized the public imagination. According to both the U.S. National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the National Institutes of Health (the latter being the source of funding for the majority of biomedical research in the U.S.), both groups not inclined to exaggerate the influence of animal ethics, by the early 1990s the U.S. Congress had been consistently receiving more letters, phone calls, faxes, e-mails and personal contacts on animal-related issues than on any other topic. And, in 2004, fully 2100 bills were floated all over the US pertaining to animal welfare, in state, local and federal legislatures!

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Ever-increasing societal concern for animal welfare, coupled with increasing awareness of animal needs has great impact on the veterinary profession. Veterinarians find themselves in complex situations facing conflicting pressures and demands. The field of veterinary ethics deals with a rational approach to the numerous moral conflicts that arise for members of the veterinary profession.

What does the scope of veterinary ethics encompass?

- 1) Veterinarians have moral obligations to *clients*, who hire them and pay their bills. The paradigmatic case of such an obligation is maintaining confidentiality.
- 2) Veterinarians have moral obligations to society in general, often encoded in law. For example, they are obliged by state law to report some diseases.
- 3) Veterinarians have moral obligations to peers and the profession.
- 4) Veterinarians have moral obligations to themselves, for example, not to provide free services to the point where they cannot afford to remain in practice or earn a decent living.
- 5) Veterinarians have moral obligations to their employees.
- 6) Veterinarians have moral obligations to animals. This is the most problematic category. Whereas moral obligations to society and other humans are well established in ethics in general, the question of moral obligations to animals has arisen only in the last 40 years.

Far and away the most difficult cases one encounters concern moral obligations to animals, since the social consensus ethic is virtually silent on animal treatment, with the exception of proscribing deliberate deviant cruelty. Yet the question of a veterinarian's moral obligation to animals is so important to veterinary medicine one can consider it "The Fundamental Question of Veterinary Ethics." The issue, of course, is to whom does the veterinarian owe primary obligation, owner or animal? On the Garage Mechanic model, the animal is like a car; where the mechanic owes nothing to the car, and fixes it or not depending on the owner's wishes. On the Pediatrician model, the clinician owes primary obligation to the animal, just as a pediatrician does to a child, despite the fact that the client pays the bills. To the anguish of veterinary practitioners, this question most often arises with regard to so-called "convenience euthanasia," when an owner wants a healthy and functional animal euthanized for frivolous reasons, such as (and these are real cases!) the dog no longer matches the color scheme. When this dichotomy is presented to veterinarians, the vast majority profess adherence to the Pediatrician model as a moral ideal. There are many other examples, such as facing a treatable animal, where the owner does not wish to spend what is required for treatment.

The pediatrician view derives from a distinction best articulated by Plato in the *Republic* with regard to what he calls craftsmen in the broadest sense. The role of the craftsman according to Plato, be it a goldsmith or shepherd or political ruler or physician or veterinarian, is to improve and enhance the value of that over which he or she exerts their art. Just as a goldsmith adds value to the raw gold crafted, so a veterinarian improves the health and well-being of the animals under his or her aegis. Unfortunately, this moral requirement conflicts with the legal status of animals, a conflict society is slowly moving to rectify to the benefit of animals, but not quickly enough.

In striking ways, the future for veterinary medicine is very much like the ancient metaphor the Stoic philosophers used to describe human life. The Stoics affirmed that life is analogous to being chained to an oxcart headed for a particular destination. A wise person will walk with the oxcart at its pace, rest when it rests, move with it. A foolish person will resist, and be dragged, broken and bloody, to the destination. Veterinarians

are strikingly in the position of those chained to the oxcart. Society is relentlessly moving forward with regard to animal ethics. Veterinarians can either acquiesce and lead or be dragged, kicking, screaming, and grievously wounded to wherever society is going. It is therefore essential to veterinary medicine's future thriving that veterinary students be taught ethics in a serious way by those who specialize in the study of ethics as a vocation, not as an afterthought.