

Working
to make
alternative
tracks the
status quo

ALTERNATIVES

IN VETERINARY MEDICAL EDUCATION



ISSUE 11
APRIL 1999

Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights



Veterinary Students Making a Difference

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Many students at the Virginia Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine (VMRCVM) are concerned about animal welfare and animal rights issues. We have both a SCAVAR club within the college and an Animal Welfare Club. These clubs have worked to institute new programs to promote animal wellness. These programs include alternatives to required laboratories and surgeries which are harmful to animals, a feral cat spay and neuter program, an animal welfare concern board, a program to allow the sale of institutional animals who are no longer needed, and a dog walking and enrichment program for dogs and cats used in research and in veterinary education.

The VMRCVM curriculum includes a variety of laboratories which utilize healthy institutional animals. Some of these laboratories result in animal discomfort, an occasional unexpected death, and some laboratories involve terminal procedures resulting in euthanasia. Many students have become involved in implementing changes such that animal suffering is reduced, while still learning principles and procedures required for a sound veterinary

education. Members of the class of 2000 were concerned about a required laboratory for the Clinical Nutrition course offered in our second year of veterinary school. During this four-day laboratory, an illness is induced in sheep, and students are required to examine, diagnose, and treat these animals. Both the induction of illness and the potential for death of the animal were of concern to many students. Interested students wrote a proposal to the course leader suggesting an alternative to inducing illness in sheep. Students proposed to work on a made-up case, while performing physical exams, and faux treatments on well sheep. This proposal was accepted, and both students and faculty were very pleased with its outcome. Approximately 10% of the class of 2000 participated in the alternative laboratory. As a result of its success, this alternative was also offered to the class of 2001. Fortunately, this laboratory has been removed from the curriculum.

The learning of surgical principles at the VMRCVM currently involves the sacrifice of many animals during the third year of the curriculum. Previously, the only alternative available to students was the use of cadavers of dogs who were healthy,

euthanized only because they were homeless. The mechanism of euthanasia is via carbon monoxide at the local pound. Many students were concerned about the source of these cadavers, as well as the mechanism of euthanasia of these animals. Students proposed obtaining cadavers of animals who died or were euthanized for medical reasons. The proposal was accepted by the college administration, and a new school policy was instituted, allowing students to obtain their dogs used for surgery from

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Veterinary Students Making a Difference

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an ethical source. Private practice veterinarians agreed to provide this alternative method of disposal to their clients, which provides for the decrease in the number of healthy animals euthanized for surgical training. Thus far, five cadavers have been donated by pet owners through their veterinarians. While not all of the cadavers needed have been obtained, we are pleased with the willingness of veterinarians and pet owners to participate. It is our hope that the VMRCVM will institute a client donation program to obtain cadavers from our veterinary teaching hospital of animals who died or were euthanized for medical reasons. This would further prevent the unnecessary death of homeless animals in veterinary education.

Along with proposing changes in the standard protocol involving the use of animals in education, the Virginia Tech Student Chapter of AVAR also works in the local Blacksburg community to decrease the feral cat population. The feral cat spay-neuter-and-release program began in 1998, when a club member, while visiting the local library, noticed a colony of cats living in and around public drainage systems. After some investigation, it was found that neither the county nor the town of Blacksburg provide a shelter or holding facility for homeless cats. After investigating the newfound colony and finding it to be in need of management, a program was devised to spay or neuter the cats and release them back into the colony. The club solicited the help of a local veterinarian, Dr. Mark Dallman, who graciously provides the space, equipment and guidance necessary to allow third and fourth year students to spay and neuter these animals. The cats are trapped, tested for feline leukemia, vaccinated for rabies and distemper, given Ivermectin for deworming, and finally spayed or neutered. Kittens who are too young for surgery are removed from the colony and are advertised for adoption. Currently two feral cat colonies are involved in this program. Students donate food to the local residents who are caring for these

colonies. This program is funded by donation only. The first donor was the town of Blacksburg, which graciously supported the establishment of the program. Students and their parents who wish to enhance student learning, while benefiting the health of feral cats, have continued to support this program since its beginning. So far, approximately fifty cats have been neutered and released or were placed in new homes. With student participation, this program will continue, hopefully minimizing the feral cat population in Blacksburg.

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— Dr. Lori Blankenship

Also involved in animal wellness, the Animal Welfare Committee has a variety of programs to protect and enrich the lives of animals utilized in veterinary education at the VMRCVM. This committee created the Animal Welfare Concern Board in 1996. This board receives anonymous concerns, via a locked box placed in the library, from any member of the college. The board investigates the concerns and responds by suggesting alternatives, or making recommendations to the individuals or groups involved. This board is composed of one or two students from each class, and two faculty members.

The Animal Welfare Committee also manages the dog walking program. This

program was designed in 1996 to allow dogs used in research and education the opportunity to escape their cement and wire runs for a walk outside. Interested students walk animals during lunch and other class breaks. This program was augmented by the Department of Research and Graduate Studies which generously funded the construction of a large dog run. During the school season, most dogs are walked at least once a week by student volunteers.

In 1997 the committee proposed the purchase of beds for the institutionally-owned dogs as well as toys and grooming aids for both the dogs and cats. These members constructed a proposal for funding which was submitted to the Hill's food committee. Funding was granted, and many animal toys and beds were bought to increase the comfort and daily activities of animals used in research.

Finally, the committee proposed a purchase policy for animals once used in teaching and research. Students, faculty, and staff members worked together to implement a policy which allows for the sale of these animals for a nominal fee to students, faculty, and staff as well as members of the community. A rigorous screening method has been developed to ensure that these animals will be placed in appropriate homes. The policy prohibits the placement of any unneutered animal and the Veterinary Teaching Hospital has agreed to spay or neuter animals prior to their sale. This policy is in the final stages of approval by Virginia Tech University and placement of a number of these animals is expected during the spring of 1999.

The use of animals in veterinary medical education, research, and in the community is of interest to many of the students at the VMRCVM. Students have contributed a lot of extracurricular effort to create and implement programs promoting animal wellness, and it is hoped that this enthusiasm for improving the lives of animals will continue with the future students of the VMRCVM.