

Veterinary Students



Tammy McNamara and her beloved dog Annie. Annie is one of the lucky ones. She was adopted after being used for experimentation and educational purposes.

Tammy McNamara is a second-year student at Oregon State University (ORS) College of Veterinary Medicine. She discusses the need for students to thoroughly investigate the use of animals in their education prior to any laboratories to prevent them from making split-second decisions about morally challenging situations. She and others in her class have prepared information on animal use at ORS so that other incoming students are not put in this position.

Preparation Prevents Split-Second Decisions

I entered veterinary school because I love animals. Like so many others, I had no idea that killing healthy animals was a part of the veterinary curriculum. My first encounter with live animals in veterinary school was in an animal-handling lab. An assortment of small animals, including mice, rats, guinea pigs, gerbils and hamsters, were brought in for us to handle. We handled and played with them but, after this enjoyable interaction, these animals were all killed following the lab. The justification that we were given for the animals being killed was that they were culled from research and would later be used for dissection.

At the time, I accepted the fact that these animals would be killed regardless of whether I handled them or not, so I resolved to learn from the experience. I was led to believe that the death of these animals was a necessary part of my education. However, seeing the empty cages sitting in the hallway brought with it a realization - I do not want to kill healthy animals. I saw my lifelong dream of becoming a veterinarian fading because I decided the cost of killing healthy animals was too high of a price to pay for my education. I have a very strong desire to become a veterinarian, but I will not compromise my integrity to become one. It was an understanding of the human-animal bond, and a compassion for the well-being of animals that originally interested me in veterinary medicine. I want to retain the sense of compassion that I compromised in the animal-handling lab.

By meeting other students with similar views and networking with veterinarians, I realized that it is not necessary to kill healthy animals to earn a degree in veterinary medicine or to become a

competent veterinarian. This was a great relief to me and I am truly indebted to the amazing people who have helped me come to this realization. I am also very fortunate to have other students in my class who share my feelings and who are able to provide support and resources for each other. I also admire all those students who are standing up for their beliefs and making changes at their veterinary colleges.

The next live animal situation I encountered was with a dog used for a neurology class. Remembering the fate of our rodents, I was terrified this dog would be killed after the course was completed. A little golden mutt with big, scared brown eyes seeking a dark corner to hide in, she instantly broke my heart. When we brought her outside during a class break, she acted as if she had never walked on grass before, prancing around like it tickled her feet. She had little socialization and was clearly petrified by the mass of students all wanting to touch and pet her. I called her Annie.

As we later learned, Annie had been living in the Lab Animal Resource building for at least a month before we were told about her. Her kennel mates had all been taken away and killed for instructional purposes in a surgery class. She was spared for our neurology course because she was "the cutest." We received permission to take Annie out on weekends and walks at lunchtime. Slowly, Annie was learning how to be a socialized dog.

As time went on, I became very curious about this shy little dog. I found out that she was about 17 months old and was a "Class A" breeding colony reject. She had been born and bred for research purposes (a "Class A" animal has never been a pet and is only used for laboratory experiments). Through her interaction with the students, Annie was participating in a large-scale, real-life experiment - learning to trust, love, and be loved. But in her records, she was only identified by a six-letter code to match the big tattoo in her ear.

As the end of the term approached, I was fearful about Annie's fate. I did not want any harm to come to Annie, so I made

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arrangements for her to leave the college. While I was not allowed to adopt her, I was able to purchase her in an auction from the Property Surplus Department. After completing the necessary paperwork and paying for her, I was able to take Annie home. She is adjusting very well to her new life as a companion and is now a beloved member of my family. Annie is one of the lucky ones. Unfortunately, there are too many others like her that suffer a fatal ending.

I find it very frustrating that students are not provided with accurate information about the source and demise of animals used in their courses beforehand. We were not told anything about the small animals used for handling or about Annie until the day these animals entered our classroom. The source of our anatomy cadavers remained foggy until a concerned classmate looked into the source on her own. The cadavers came from another university so she had to call different people there to pinpoint where the animals were actually coming from. Finding ethically-acceptable

cadavers and alternatives to the harmful use of animals is time consuming, especially for a full-time veterinary student. But alternatives do exist! My experiences after my first year of veterinary school have taught me to investigate thoroughly if and how animals are to be used in our classes well before the class even starts. Being prepared relieves me from making split-second decisions about morally challenging situations.

Although my efforts to gather complete and accurate information on the source and use of animals for educational purposes are often met with resistance, I feel that this information is important and that the faculty should readily provide it. As a veterinary student who cares deeply about animals and whose tuition money is used by the school for educational purposes, I believe I have the right to know where these animals come from, how they are cared for, and what their fates will be. Therefore, my classmates and I have compiled information on how animals are used in the first-year courses at Oregon State University. To

obtain this information we questioned faculty, made phone calls, and looked into sources using information gathered from other students. Unfortunately, the administration at ORS would not allow us to include this information in the freshman packet but I have been informed that the same type of information would be provided by the college. We are hopeful that ORS will follow through with their promise.

I have requested information for the upcoming years. So far I have had to rely on information from other students because I was unable to get this information directly from the college. Information concerning the source of animals is available from colleges via the Freedom of Information Act, but I have found this to be a time-consuming and lengthy process. This has all been concerning because complete and accurate information should be provided to all students so that we can make our own informed decisions about the use of animals engaged for our education.

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achieve the best educational outcomes, such as in alternative veterinary surgical courses, where students learn basic manual skills such as suturing and instrument handling using simulated organs and other models, and then progress to simulated surgery on *ethically-sourced cadavers* (obtained from animals who have died naturally or in accidents or been euthanized for medical reasons). Finally, they assist with and then perform supervised surgeries on real patients who actually benefit from the surgery, as distinct from on healthy animals who are later killed. A very popular component of alternative veterinary surgical programs worldwide is the neutering of homeless dogs and cats from animal shelters, which provides invaluable experience for the students, while at the same time assisting the shelters and the animals they're seeking to rehome.

The success of such methods can be personally attested to by this author, who, along with a classmate, jointly became Western Australia's first veterinary students to be granted alternatives to all of the terminal surgical laboratory classes at

Murdoch University in 2000. Instead of performing the traditional terminal surgeries, we gained external experience in private veterinary clinics and animal shelters, performed simulated surgeries on ethically-sourced cadavers, and performed supervised sterilizations at Murdoch on dogs and cats from an animal shelter. Jointly we did not participate as surgeon or assistant surgeon in a total of, at most, 13 scheduled surgeries at Murdoch. Instead, we performed or assisted with a total of at least 62 additional surgeries, including 21 dog and cat spays. It felt exceedingly good to be positively affecting the dog and cat overpopulation problem by neutering animals, and thereby preventing unnecessary deaths, instead of causing them during our surgical training. You can obtain a more detailed description of the outcomes of the first year of Murdoch's alternative surgical program from me or from the conference proceedings.

Other speakers from universities around the world made it clear that the changes occurring at Murdoch are part of an inevitable trend towards humane

alternatives to harmful animal use. In North America, for example, by January 2001, 20 of the 31 veterinary colleges were offering alternatives to invasive experiments or other procedures, with 18 offering alternatives to terminal surgeries. Two of the 31 had eliminated terminal surgeries altogether, namely Tufts University and Prince Edward Island. The newest U.S. veterinary school, the Western University of Health Sciences in Southern California, will harm no animals throughout its curriculum and has a "reverence for life" philosophy.

Such colleges send a powerful message. They prove that there is no longer any need to kill to learn how to heal. The world of veterinary education is changing, and veterinary schools throughout the world can choose to either help shape the future or to be shaped by it.

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