I started my veterinary science training in 2004, and I graduated in 2008. Like many others, my dream since childhood had been to become a veterinarian. However, for me this came at a great cost emotionally, as the constant animal killing for my education took its toll. My graduation day, rather than being a time of jubilation, was a somewhat Pyrrhic victory, which left me wondering if it had all been worth it.

Although I believe that some animal use (live animals and cadavers) is essential for educating future veterinarians, I was shocked by the terminal practical classes which were then part of the veterinary curriculum at my university. In these terminal classes, students practised various procedures (such as bladder catheterisation, venepuncture and radiography) on living, anaesthetised animals, before euthanising them. The animals used were usually healthy pound-animals and ex-racing greyhounds. There was no body donation programme for obtaining ethically-sourced cadavers in place at that time, and no ethical objection policy until 2008. Most difficult for me were the terminal surgery practical classes, in which students were required to choose a dog to practise on and later kill.

The negligible educational benefits of the terminal practical classes were outweighed by the extreme moral anguish that I felt. What made it even worse was that the terminal surgery classes bore no comparison to the high standards later required for private clients in the university’s veterinary hospital. In terminal surgery classes, cleaning the animal’s skin prior to surgery was not as thorough, heat mats were not provided, and surgical kits were not sterile.

The ‘resuscitation’ practical class was horrific. Veterinary students repeatedly overdosed and resuscitated live dogs, before cutting the chest open and squeezing the animal’s heart, in a final, futile attempt to restore a heartbeat in the dying animal. Student attitudes toward the practical classes were diverse. In a previous year, a veterinary student had enjoyed this class so much that she apparently exclaimed afterwards “It was wonderful to hold the dog’s heart in my hand as it died!” Despite the university having a dog resuscitation mannequin, this was not offered to the class.

I felt that I would never be able to balance the lives I would later save as a qualified veterinarian with the lives I was now taking as a student. We were told not to discuss the terminal surgery classes ‘socially’, and I believe this stifled the willingness of other students to voice any ethical concerns that they might have had. There is also a risk that educators who mark students for ‘enthusiasm’ during practicals, encourage students to participate in activities that harm animals. Previous studies describe bitterness among students toward those promoting alternatives, and a “macho bravado culture” in veterinary school.

The irony of the terminal surgery practical classes was that, no matter how well or how poorly students performed the surgeries, the outcome for the animals was inevitable — death at the hands of those supposedly being trained to save lives. Such a contradiction was increasingly hard to bear. I requested aged or sick dogs to use in the surgery practical classes, and a staff member supported me by helping to obtain such dogs. Whilst this was slightly easier for me than killing a healthy puppy or a pregnant bitch, as some of my fellow students had to do, it was still taking a life.

It seemed that we were encouraged to regard these dogs as somehow deserving disrespect, merely because they are surplus to the requirements of others. As each week passed, and the number of dogs that died for the benefit of my education increased, my self-hatred grew. I found this statement quite bizarre. If a dog behaves in the ‘wrong’ way, should the animal be sentenced to vivisection and death by lethal injection at the hands of future veterinarians? Does the ‘capital punishment’ of pound dogs serve as a deterrent to other dogs which may dare to perform ‘wrong’ acts? Such comments from staff may indoctrinate students to believe that pound dogs and ex-racing greyhounds are mere tools for our education, and, as stated elsewhere, create a reliance on pounds to supply animals for teaching. Being told of the large number of dogs being euthanised at pounds, and that “They’re going to die anyway”, made it no easier for me. I have since worked as a veterinarian...
in a pound, but have never felt that pound animals should be used for terminal surgery practice to try and justify their death.

I believe that insufficient attention is paid by educators to the encouragement of respect among veterinary students toward animals and people during the veterinary course. I feel that respect is as vital a part of animal use as the other Three Rs. Unfortunately, some veterinary students are disrespectful toward animals and their cadavers. Some students chose to write obscenities on a cow during an anatomy class, and used a stock-marking crayon to draw ‘lipstick’ on her face and ridicule her; others filmed each other fooling around with pieces of a horse cadaver and posted the film on the internet. One student laughed at the female pound dog which was to be euthanised after a terminal surgery practical class — “Ha ha! Your dog’s got tits!” Disturbingly, one student even recommended culling the entire teaching herd of dairy cows as ‘The Final Solution’.

These are not incidents isolated to the veterinary school that I attended. Colleagues from other veterinary schools have had similar experiences. One told me how a veterinary student joked about raping the rabbits used in teaching classes, taking photographs of himself squeezing the animal’s genitals to display on the internet.

I believe that veterinary educators must constantly work to encourage a climate of respect during veterinary training, as a matter of urgent priority. This respect must extend toward both animals (live and cadavers) and humans (staff and students) in the veterinary course. It is not acceptable that students with compassion are silenced, whether deliberately or not. These are the future veterinarians who can bring about change. Let’s work to nurture their compassion, listen without judgement to their ethical concerns, and continue to develop and embrace humane alternatives in veterinary education.

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References