

## EDITORIAL

# Similar but not the same: the teaching of veterinary and medical ethics

Carol Gray

THE inclusion of veterinary ethics as a discrete and recognisable subject in veterinary curricula has been a creeping progression rather than a huge leap. In comparison to medical ethics, the acknowledgement of its existence as a concept in its own right is relatively recent. The teaching of medical ethics in the UK was enhanced by its inclusion in the General Medical Council's first version of 'Tomorrow's Doctors' (General Medical Council 1993), both in terms of knowledge ('ethical and legal issues relevant to the practice of medicine') and attitudes ('awareness of the moral and ethical responsibilities involved'). By 1997, most medical schools in the UK included medical ethics in their core curriculum (Fulford and others 1997) and several authors have proposed suitable areas of curricular content (Goldie 2000, Stirrat and others 2010).

The delay in the development of veterinary ethics teaching is perhaps surprising, as the debate on the ethics of animal use is far-reaching and often public. However, although the moral status of animals and welfare-based ethics are still relevant, there has been increasing interest in veterinary professionalism and the ethics associated with it in recent years (May 2012, Mossop and Cobb 2013). This has created a

closer relationship between veterinary ethics and medical ethics, and perhaps given it a higher profile as a distinct subject.

Medical and veterinary ethics could therefore be considered to be similar, but not the same. For example, although the ethics of professionalism, which include virtues such as altruism, integrity and trust, apply equally well to veterinarians and physicians, any attempt to apply the principles of biomedical ethics – autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (Beauchamp and Childress 2009) – to veterinary medicine inevitably falls at the first hurdle. We only have to ask, 'Whose autonomy are we respecting?' to realise the limitations of trying to apply this to animals, or even to animal owners, once financial and legal constraints are applied.

Similarly, when we look at the deontological (rule-based ethics) aspects of animal rights versus animal welfare, we realise the huge differences between human and veterinary medical ethics. The basic human right to life, and the overriding principle of autonomy and therefore the right to refuse treatment, which are so fundamental to medical ethics, are superseded by the duty to protect animals from unnecessary suffering and to perform euthanasia when that suffering is deemed to be extreme. In addition, medical ethics has exerted more influence on legislation than has veterinary ethics, which is more influenced by legislation. This leads to a tendency to teach veterinary ethics and law together, with an emphasis on animal welfare and animal

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health legislation, and their impact on what we can or ought to do to animals.

The relative lack of veterinary influence on animal welfare and the ethics of animal use is concerning, but perhaps not surprising. As Woods (2012) states, 'veterinarians rarely feature in histories of animal ethics'. Indeed, according to Woods, the initial claim of the veterinary profession to be the upholders of animal welfare and ethical providers of treatment, was an attempt to set themselves apart from the unqualified animal healers, an early example of professional (and business) ethics. In recent years, there has been a welcome increase in the number of veterinarians who have campaigned on animal welfare issues, via media appearances and a strong social media presence.

This leads on to the consideration of veterinary professional ethics and the perception of veterinarians as role models, whether as work experience providers in practice, or as educators. Schull and others (2012) investigated the characteristics of those selected as role models in the veterinary profession, and found that the qualities identified fitted well with ideas of professionalism; in medicine there have been suggestions for the inclusion of this role model function in teacher training (Cruess and others 2008).

The paper by Magalhães-Sant'Ana (2014), summarised on p 592 of this issue of *Veterinary Record*, is a timely comparison of the content of veterinary ethics teaching at three different veterinary schools. Using a qualitative methodology, the essence of ethics teaching at these three institutions is collated and carefully analysed. There are three fundamental messages arising from this work. The first, perhaps surprising, revelation might be the inclusion of veterinary history as a subject that underpins ethics teaching at the veterinary school in Lisbon. Woods (2012) gives credence to this inclusion by looking at the origins of veterinary professional ethics, and providing food for thought in terms of the profession's relationship with animal ethics and welfare.

A second important message from the discussion is that all three schools in the study considered it essential to include some underpinning knowledge of ethical theories. The argument proposed in the paper is that this teaching develops the ability to consider different ethical opinions and to live more comfortably with pluralism. An additional benefit may be that this teaching allows veterinary students and graduates to cope with moral stress in a practical way, by making it easier to accept difficult decisions through the consideration of alternative ethical theories. In a high-stress profession, this could be the most important message of all.

Thirdly, the paper encourages an approach to research that is not looking for absolute proof of a concept (positivist approach), but examines various interpretations of that concept (constructivist approach). The use of a qualitative methodology for the study is appropriate; however, if the strong link with animal welfare science, which has tended to move in the opposite direction, is maintained, then ethics teaching could suffer. In this context, a tool for quantitatively measuring the moral judgment of veterinary students has been developed (Verrinder and Phillips 2014).

Ethics allows us to develop different approaches to thinking about our world, and takes us outside the comfort zone of science, where there is an objective answer if you do enough investigation. The tension between teaching normative ethics and teaching a framework for ethical thinking is introduced in the Magalhães-Sant'Ana (2014) paper, but remains an area for further investigation. Some medical schools have combined ethics teaching with subjects such as evidence-based medicine and clinical audit (Rhodes and others 2006), and this is a potential method of including both positivist and constructivist epistemological approaches. However, as Magalhães-Sant'Ana is careful to point out, the study looks at the 'what' of ethics teaching, rather than the 'how'. It provides a useful outline of the approach to

curriculum content at three carefully selected veterinary schools and, as such, offers a starting place for those schools that have not yet embraced veterinary ethics as a core curriculum subject.

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