

Training the animal doctor: Caring as a clinical skill

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Abstract

The veterinary profession requires that students are well trained in clinical skills and have a solid basis of theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, the guardians of patients and society as a whole, expect the veterinarian to treat patients with care and compassion. The concept of care as a central skill is not always emphasised in veterinary education, but a caring approach may better enable the veterinarian to diagnose and treat his patients. This presentation discusses the reasons to look upon care and compassion as essential clinical skills to be developed and prioritised within veterinary education. The different teaching tools and approaches that are, in the author's opinion, best suited to develop such skills are discussed, as well as teaching methods that may be counter-productive to these objectives. In particular, the role of animal experiments within education is challenged, and their role in potentially limiting the number of motivated students wanting to enter veterinary education and the profession is discussed.

Keywords: clinical skills, care, veterinary education, alternatives, animal experiments

Introduction

In most people's eyes, the veterinarian's role is to alleviate pain and suffering in animals. People expect the veterinarian to care about his patients, and to do what is best for the animal. The imperative *Primum non nocere* (*First, do no harm*), has provided the philosophical basis to human medicine. Likewise, many people see this as a natural part of the veterinarian's oath.

Awareness about animals' needs and respect for animals in general become more widespread in society as animal advocacy gains momentum and studies of cognitive ethology continue to give information about the minds of animals (Bekoff, 2007). Accordingly, animals in close relationships with humans are increasingly seen as family members (Katcher, 1981; Hafen et al., 2007). Thus society's demand on the veterinarian's ethical approach also increases: veterinarians are expected to genuinely care about their patients.

Care and compassion as essential clinical skills

This expectation could be interpreted as a demand for professional skills that might not yet be sufficiently emphasised in the training of veterinarians. Could compassion and ability to care better enable the veterinarian to diagnose and treat his patients? The veterinary profession revolves around understanding how another being feels and why, and acting upon that knowledge to improve that being's situation. Is that not the very essence of compassion? The following points outline some arguments for care

to be put at the core of the veterinary profession – not merely as a personality trait, but as a crucial part of the job, a clinical *skill* that every veterinarian should strive to develop. I argue that, as part of a healing profession with animals as patients, veterinarians should consider lack of caring ability and compassion for patients, as a professional mistake.

- Significant research in the field of ethology proposes that empathy as a study tool is essential to understanding animals (Bekoff (ed.), 2000; Bekoff, 2005; Goodall, 2007). Ethology and animal behaviour is essential knowledge for the committed veterinarian – understanding an animal's normal behaviour is the basis for understanding the behavioural changes indicating disease.
- Veterinarians need the ability to search for and find what the animal feels. In diagnostics it is essential to have an eye for the signs of suffering and pain, signs of "what is wrong". Diagnostics can surely be made without much compassion, purely on the basis of a list of symptoms - but will the veterinarian who wants to understand the animal not be better equipped than the one who keeps his distance to the animal? Distance is by definition contrary to the ability of compassion, as it prevents our understanding of other being's suffering. An understanding of the emotional state of the animal may not be effectively achieved as long as there is a barrier preventing the clinician from seeing the situation from the animal's point of view.

- A caring approach as opposed to a more indifferent approach is less likely to cause stress in the patient during examination. Such stress may mask symptoms and result in less accurate diagnosis.
- A veterinarian who is genuinely interested in the well-being of his patients *for the sake of* the patients has a motivation for revealing owner/environment-related health problems such as poor housing, poor guardian knowledge about animal behaviour and natural needs, as well as owner neglect. It is not always simple to inquire and interfere on behalf of the animal in these situations, but the veterinarian motivated by compassion with his patients will be more likely to do so than the one motivated primarily by his service-relationship with the owner. The caring veterinarian will not only cut the rabbit's overgrown nails as requested, but will inform the owner about a rabbit's natural needs and suggest changes in the environment – thus preventing future health problems. The caring veterinarian will not automatically perform the requested 'euthanasia' of the lively adolescent dog that the owner cannot cope with, but will take time to explain to the owner about natural behaviour, suggest training and education about the dog/guardian relationship or rehoming – thus preventing a patient's death.
- Clinicians will acknowledge that it is often essential for recovery that the animal is not stressed or afraid, but feels safe with the health care workers. The physiological background for stress being counterproductive to the healing process is well known. Imagine a critically ill animal receiving the same medication, the same amount of intravenous fluids and housed within the same environment – but treated with care or with indifference. It is hardly controversial to claim that the former has a better chance of successful recovery.
- The caring veterinarian will be more likely to use analgesics when appropriate, striving to avoid suffering in patients. Studies also show the correlation between analgesic use and attitudes towards animals (Levine et al, 2005).
- The caring veterinarian will have an additional motivation to gain up-to-date information on treatment possibilities because he/she has an interest in seeing the animal well and alive. Where a more indifferent veterinarian may suggest euthanasia without investigating new possibilities and latest best practices that might enable a cure, the caring veterinarian will make an extra effort to seek information for the sake of the individual patient.

Animal experiments in education – teaching indifference?

Increasingly the concepts of care and compassion,

and knowledge about animal welfare, are emerging as central parts of the veterinary profession (Millman et al, 2005; Main et al, 2005; de Boo and Knight, 2005). Then how do universities teach these parts of the profession to students? Sometimes they do not, but seem to neglect the issue (Millman et al, 2005; Main et al, 2005; de Boo and Knight, 2005) – and sometimes they teach the opposite (Pedersen, 2002; Capaldo, 2004; Capaldo, 2005; Pedersen, 2007). Universities may even prevent students with a well-developed ability to care from entering the course, or try to stop them from completing it (Pedersen, 2002; Capaldo, 2004; Capaldo, 2005; Pedersen, 2007, InterNICHE, 2007; Knight, 2002). They do so by applying teaching methods that demand the harming and killing of animals for the sake of education.

Many veterinary students are highly motivated to use their future skills to help and to care for animals, and are drawn to the profession by their compassion for living beings (Sprecher, 2004). This motivation may be compromised by encountering animal experiments, and the use of animals whose lives were terminated for learning purposes. Applying learning methods that involve harm to animals can limit the number of motivated students wanting to enter life science education and professions (Pedersen, 2002; Capaldo, 2004; Capaldo, 2005; Pedersen, 2007). InterNICHE has first-hand experience with students in this situation, and can unfortunately confirm that veterinary medicine do lose some of their most motivated students by subjecting them to involvement in harmful animal use.

There is evidence that harmful animal use in education has considerable impact on the student in different ways (Pedersen, 2002; Capaldo, 2004; Capaldo, 2005; Pedersen, 2007). This impact also comprises the passing on of values and attitudes. Such teaching methods can bring about and teach the students desensitisation – an obstacle to the essential skill of caring. Animal experiments habituate the students into accepting the instrumental use of animals – and the barren living conditions to which many of the animals are subjected. Studies recognise this desensitisation process in students exposed to animal experiments or even dissections performed on purposely killed animals. The process can manifest itself in a tendency to mutilate the dissected animal body (Berman, 1984). The change in attitudes happens at all levels, from veterinary and medical university (Maroueva, 2007; Arluke and Hafferty, 1996; de Boo and Knight, 2006) to 13-year olds doing their first dissection (Solot, 1995; Solot and Arluke, 1997). A clear deterioration of compassion is found in qualitative studies (Solot, 1995; Solot and Arluke, 1997), and a decreased sensitivity towards animal suffering and emotions in veterinary students as they approach the completion of their studies (Hellyer et al, 1999; Paul and Podberscek, 2000) suggest a negative impact of the education itself.

The creation of such change in attitudes is often not articulated clearly as an educational objective and is therefore sometimes referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Pedersen, 2002; Capaldo, 2005; Pedersen, 2007). However, some statements by teachers may reveal that these objectives are not as hidden as they may seem, but rather a conscious choice to influence the students, and secure the perpetuation of old traditions – the harmful use of animals in science:

"I thought about what we can do when students refuse to take part in animal labs and more importantly, what we can do that will prevent or reverse antiscientific opinions in our students (...) Our special opportunity arises from physiology being quintessentially an experimental science (...) we must convince our students that the future development of physiology depends on the use of animals. If teachers do not come to grips with this responsibility, students will not have the motivation or confidence to take the lead in shaping public opinion." (Hansen, 1993)

The desensitisation process is evidently seen by some teachers as a teaching objective in itself, preparing the student for "real life" by hardening him/her, creating a mind set in him/her where the animal is seen as a "study object"/"tool" rather than an individual being/patient. This teaching objective seems to be motivated more by the wish to convey certain attitudes towards animal use than the need for creating good professionals. Moreover it conflicts with the fact that to an increasing degree "real life" demands ethically aware and compassionate veterinarians.

How to teach compassion?

At some universities specific programs to teach animal welfare and animal ethics are being implemented (de Boo and Knight, 2005). A first step, however, is using learning methods that in themselves respect animal lives and do not cause harm to animals. This has shown to increase awareness in the student and help develop mature behaviour. Comprehensive studies show that teaching objectives concerning traditional practical skills and factual knowledge can also be fully met and better met (Patronek & Rauch, 2007; Balcombe, 2003) with practicals not involving live (or purposely killed) animals:

- A wide range of quality computer programs are designed to give insight into physiological and anatomical contexts and to familiarise students with the laboratory environment, without teaching the additional disregard for animals' lives (Martinsen and Jukes, 2005; Jukes and Chiuiia, 2003).
- Self-experimentation provides a powerful teaching tool for different aims (Scroop, 2003), at the same time giving students insight into being the "patient", which is a valuable experience for

looking at situations from the patient's point of view.

- The use of models for skills acquisition – proven very effective by a number of experienced teachers (Smeak, 2003; Rasmussen, 2003) - communicates the message that all animal patients deserve our best treatment, and therefore the best training, and no living animal is considered a disposable "model" for another animal.
- The use of ethically sourced animal tissue – tissue from animals that are not purposely put down for the cause – gives a direct message to the students: animals' lives matter and should not be taken if it can be avoided. Prof A. Kumar of Tufts University in USA reports the students' reactions when using such animals from a client donation program for anatomy class rather than killed animals: "Students have a better appreciation of anatomy and exhibit more mature behaviour in taking care of the cadaver and performing their dissections with a sense of responsibility." (Kumar, 2003). Client donation programs may also teach the students valuable lessons about the human/animal bond and the grieving process after companion animal loss.
- Apprenticeship with experienced colleagues in the clinic teaches students respect and consideration for patients and guardians (Smeak, 2003). Surgery training by means of beneficial spay/neuter services for animal protection organisations and shelters provides a combination of teaching attitudes of responsible companion animal care, respect for animals and surgical skills as the students play an important part in helping resolving an animal welfare problem (Clevenger and Kass, 2003).

Conclusion

Alternatives to harmful animal use not only avoid teaching that harm is acceptable, but also in different ways enhance students' awareness and ability to care. As development of this ability continues to become an acknowledged part of the veterinary curriculum, the need to implement teaching methods without the harmful use of animals is an important aim in itself.

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