

Large Animals—“The New Frontier of Veterinary Ethics”

The leading veterinary ethicist Jerrold Tannenbaum refers to food and other farm animals as the “new frontier of veterinary ethics” (see the opening of Chapter 23 in the 1995 edition of this leading veterinary ethics text). How the veterinary profession will deal with this “frontier” and its countless issues is only now being worked out, but it is increasingly obvious that veterinarians are in a position, if they choose to take advantage of it, to make a major contribution to how modern societies resolve complex problems arising in this traditional but ever changing field of human-nonhuman relationships.

There are, of course, *many* materials that argue in support of or opposition to the traditional industries and practices involved in “factory farming” or, to use the U.S. government’s term, “confined animal feeding operations.” A list of some of the more contentious ethical issues and practices is included below—note that this list by no means contains the *only* ethical issues raised by use of food animals; there are, for example, *many benefits* to inexpensively produced food, and proponents of modern food production make powerful points about the *ethical dimensions* of such benefits.

Fundamental issues for veterinarians, of course, revolve not only around humans’ need for food, but also around the interests and lives of the living beings that we find in today’s production facilities. The next assigned reading for this session is a JAVMA article from July 2002 in which Dr. Wendy Underwood addresses pain and distress in agricultural animals—what is the significance of such issues being raised in the profession’s primary journal? What is the individual veterinarian’s role in such issues? And what role might the profession *as a whole* take?

The assigned reading also includes an article written by Dr. Lara Rasmussen, the Director of Surgery and Clinical Skills at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Western University of Health Sciences. Published in the publication *Alternatives in Veterinary Medical Education* distributed by the controversial Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights, the article is entitled “Accent on an Alternative—An Innovative Approach to Veterinary Training and How It Applies to Large Animals” (*Alternatives in Veterinary Medical Education*, Issue 20, April 2002). As Rasmussen raises her various queries and challenges, note that it is not only the *practice* of veterinary medicine following veterinary school that raises ethical issues, but also the manner in which

students are, during their four years in veterinary school, trained to see, talk about, and treat the animals under humans' control. The newly formed veterinary school at Western University has taken its cue from the Cummings School's careful and deep engagement with ethical issues and now argues, as our community has for years, that engaging such issues is a central part of any healthy and truly professional veterinary education. Do you agree with the specific proposals made by Dr. Rasmussen? If so, why? If not, why not?

A more detailed and very influential point of view on the general issue of farm animal welfare is advanced by a respected scholar and veterinary ethicist who regularly comes to Tufts (he will be on campus again this November). Dr. Bernard E. Rollin has taught these issues for a quarter of a century at Colorado State University's veterinary school—a succinct statement of his views can be found in his *Farm Animal Welfare: Social, Bioethical, and Research Issues*, Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1995.

You should also stay abreast of the AVMA's position statements on issues within this area—there are interesting signs of ferment (see, for example, the reference below to the AVMA's new position on the issue of forced molting of chickens).

General Comments on Ethics Discussions re Large Animal Issues

The ethical issues associated with humans' use of the larger nonhuman animals are complex and increasingly controversial. Ironically, most of the more contentious ethical issues are rarely raised in veterinary ethics classes.

Why might veterinary ethics classes have historically downplayed this central part of humans' interaction with Earth's other animals? Perhaps it is related to the fact that most veterinary schools were closely tied to agricultural interests as part of their origin. Perhaps the practices listed below were assumed to be without controversial ethical features. Perhaps the issues have simply been too politically sensitive to be raised in any detail.

One reason ethical debate on farm animal issues may continue to have a low profile in most circles discussing veterinary ethics is that society has recently changed its attitude toward companion and laboratory animals far more than it has changed its attitudes toward farm animals—these changes have led to well-known tensions in values regarding companion and research animals. Veterinary ethics classes thus have had much to deal with in addressing the fundamental changes regarding companion and research

animals. Perhaps this is why farm animal issues have kept a low profile in veterinary ethics classes even though the issue is debated in heated ways in other ethical circles.

Whatever the reason(s) for the lack of attention in the past, you should at the very least know of the debate over this area. It probably is not going to disappear soon.

Two other factors very likely have impacted what contemporary veterinarians think of the relevant issues. First, intensive rearing practices today are in some respects, though hardly in all, harsher than practices that prevailed in traditional animal husbandry. Thus, what is at issue for many people today who ask questions about the following practices is not necessarily the value of *traditional* practices, but, rather, the ethical dimensions of certain *modern* practices and methods chosen because they create economic efficiencies.

Second, the emergence of a new breed of veterinary student, if you will, may affect how the issues are seen. Contemporary students, as is well known, are more urban and predominantly female. In the past, students were predominantly from agricultural communities and male. Will these changes affect the paradigm of veterinary ethics that applies to these large animal issues?

You might want to note at least the following about debates touching on these subjects—any proposed resolution of an issue that requires consumers to give up benefits and practices that they have traditionally enjoyed will be controversial. A similar point can be made about proposed solutions that require traditional ways of life and jobs to be given up.

For some people, there is absolutely no reason to eliminate the suffering or solve the many other problems experienced by production animals. For others, the challenge of doing so is the central challenge of our time. For others still, there is simply no hope of resolving these complex issues. Whatever your opinion, you owe it to yourself, your profession, and your community to be informed on these issues.

For the purpose of clarifying your own evaluation of the ethics involved in large animal issues, you will want to think about what kind of “ethics” you believe are involved in any one particular issue. Note that what any one individual thinks about these issues will be affected dramatically by his or her personal ethics. In other words, if someone supports or opposes a particular practice, that acceptance or opposition

is likely to be grounded in the individual's own personal ethical values. This may be true even when this person's support or opposition is expressed primarily in terms of *other* areas of social value that one can study (they may say, for example, "It's legal, so it's an acceptable practice"—you will often in ethical matters need to pierce through someone's expression of their approval to the real reason for their approval—here, it is quite possible our advocate is driven by a psychologically grounded preference for tradition or, alternatively, her own consumer tastes or, again alternatively, by a deep personal conviction that the practice being discussed would be moral even if it didn't have the support of the law).

It is of the utmost importance in assessing the nature of the debate over the items on the list below (and, in general, any widespread practice) to recognize that both law and social ethics clearly support the traditional practice of using nonhuman animals for food or raw materials. To be sure, there have been attempts to ban non-essential traditions involving some animals, such as entertainment like greyhound racing or the use of exotic animals in traveling circuses. But most long-standing and widespread practices remain unchallenged because modern food production practices are typically seen as a continuation of the millennia-long tradition of using nonhumans for food. What is at issue for some opponents, of course, is not food production, but some of the conditions and practices that are found in the modern food production techniques popularly called "factory farming."

So note carefully that in some very important senses of the words "ethical" and "right," the practices listed below will, because they are *now legal and generally accepted*, automatically qualify for some people as *obviously* "ethical" and "right."

Such facts are, of course, very relevant, though they are by no means always the final word in ethical matters—race-based slavery was both legal and accepted in the U.S. during the early 19th century, and yet we would struggle today with the claim that the legality and social acceptance automatically made that form of racism and slavery exempt from moral challenges. Similar arguments could be made regarding women's voting rights and child labor laws—the truth is that social approval of a practice may, in the future, be withdrawn. Thus, the fact that something is *now* both legal and socially

approved by no means is conclusive as to whether that practice will *always* be held “ethical.”

Of some interest in recent decades is the fact that more than half the states have now enacted laws that expressly exempt farm animal practices from anti-cruelty laws. Such laws were originally drafted in the 19th Century to protect farm animals. This trend toward exemption of modern farm practices from these protective laws has been generated by the food production industry, which fears that modern farming practices might be challenged in a court because our society has recently become much more aware of, and sensitive about, human cruelty to other animals.

There is, interestingly, a trend regarding anti-cruelty laws that goes in precisely the *opposite* direction (that is, the trend *expands*, rather than contracts, the effectiveness of existing anti-cruelty laws)—in the last decades, more than half the states have enacted laws that provide increased criminal penalties for the most flagrant forms of cruelty.

Regarding food animals, though, the trend is to ever *less* legal protection (the details of this are set out in a 1996 book entitled *Beyond the Law* by David Wolfson). This development comes at precisely the time that legal protection for nonhumans has begun to expand, as evidenced by the emergence of “animal law” classes (now offered at more than 50 American law schools, including Harvard and Yale).

If one inquires into what is driving some people to claim that various large animal practices should get increased *ethical* scrutiny (despite the decrease in legal protections for the animals involved), one will find that various areas of *academic or philosophical* ethics, such as influential theories about rights and various forms of the philosophy known “utilitarianism,” are often brought into the discussion. Whatever approach one finds convincing, it is clear that that much more ethics-based thinking has been extended to various nonhumans—whales, elephants, primates, dogs, cats, and others have often been given extra protections because of recent social debates. Lots of veterinarians have played a significant role in these debates, and the AVMA has recently created its own task force to address the increasingly popular subject of “animal law.”

Apart from ethics and law, some believe that practicality-based calculations, often under the general name “prudence,” provide challenges to some of the modern practices listed below. For example, the environmental consequences, human health risks, and net

economic costs of, say, pork or chicken production are now talked about much more frequently. When such problems are factored into the obvious benefit of having inexpensive food available for consumers, does society come out ahead or not? There is, importantly, no consensus on a number of these issues, such as ecological damage flowing from confined animal feeding operations. More consensus has arisen regarding the risks of subtherapeutic use of antibiotics, but there remains much dispute about the extent of the problem. And as to negative economic consequences that result from modern farming practices (including hidden health costs for both consumers and neighbors, as well as industry workers), the debate is only beginning. It is almost certain that debates over such matters will intensify during your lifetime.

Since various forms of debate over many practices on the list below will, no doubt, continue to rage, veterinarians are in a position to help everyone see vitally important issues. Hopefully, advocates of the competing positions will provide all of the relevant data and not merely that which supports their own position—the veterinary profession has a very important role in making sure high quality information is available and disseminated widely. We need all of the relevant information to decide honestly what course of action we want to advocate (such as supporting certain modern methods, working for regulation, or even boycotting practices which involve, in our own judgment, unacceptable amounts of suffering and/or harm).

Veterinary ethicists such as Rollin and Tannenbaum call for a well-informed veterinary profession to lead our country and the world in assessing how we should deal with coming problems. If you ever attend an AVMA convention, ask yourself the obvious questions—is the profession informed? Even if the answer is “yes,” is the profession leading or following in these and other areas?

JAVMA’s “Animal Welfare Forum”

Detailed information and diverse perspectives on farm animal issues have been available for some time in AVMA publications. For example, the November 15, 2001 issue of JAVMA had nine articles on bovine welfare. JAVMA now offers a regular feature entitled “Animal Welfare Forum.” The November 1, 2004, issue focused on feral cats, while the February 1, 2005, issue included an article by Temple Grandin on slaughterhouse issues. The April 15, 2005, issue dealt with sow housing, which has been

the subject of legislation in various states (Florida voters in 2002 by a vote of 55% to 45% outlawed gestation crates).

This increased emphasis in the profession's major journal is matched by the 2004 vote of AVMA delegates against the practice of forced molting of layer hens—this issue was voted on in 2004 after having been rejected by the AVMA's policy makers for six consecutive years.

Ethically Sensitive Large Animal Issues

These changes, along with increasing media coverage of contemporary intensive food raising practices, reflect interesting new challenges. The following areas are some that have been raised recently or in the past by various media, politicians, industry reformers, ethicists, and industry opponents as involving potentially sensitive ethical dimensions (the items on the list were mentioned during Dr. Annette Rauch's 2002 lectures on farm animals at the Center for Animals and Public Policy). As prospective leaders on "animal issues" in the community, you and other veterinarians will often be called on by clients, friends, and even media to give opinions on these subjects, all of which makes sense given your profession's commitments to healing and the elimination of unnecessary suffering.

A. Pork Industry

- confinement of pregnant sows
- aberrant behavior in close confinement
- social needs and food limitations
- piglet issues: castration, tainted meat, tail docking
- demands and problems of grower/finisher system
- problems with transportation and slaughter
- environmental and health implications (for these animals and for humans)

B. Broiler Chicken Industry

- life span, living conditions
- group size, social hierarchy
- selection for rapid growth and heavy musculature
- food restrictions
- environmental and health implications (for these animals and for humans)
- transportation to slaughter
- slaughterhouse problems

C. Egg Industry

- battery cage production systems
- debeaking/toe trimming
- aberrant behavior
- forced molting
- transportation to slaughter
- slaughterhouse problems

D. Dairy

- life span, living conditions
- calf welfare, unwanted male calves, separation of mother/calf pair
- wide variety of housing systems
- tail docking
- lameness, mastitis
- BST controversy
- downer cows

E. Beef Industry

- ranching as a way of life
- cattle on open range land
- feedlots
- welfare concerns—branding, castration, ocular neoplasia, dehorning, heat detection
- transportation from range to feedlot, and then to slaughter
- downer animals
- slaughterhouse problems
- environmental effects of this industry
- antibiotic use and residues in meat

F. Veal Industry

- source of veal calves
- housing and diet of the calves
- consumer preference for pale meat (a matter of appearance and not taste)
- medical and behavioral consequences of management techniques

G. Horse racing

- injury risks
- horses' enjoyment
- absentee owners
- racetrack realities
- insurance problems generating lack of concern for the animals

H. Horses generally

- horses as companions, horses as food animals
- slaughter issues
- medical problems from feeding limitations of most domestic housing arrangements
- Premarin mares and their foals

I. Family farms versus corporate farms

- loss of family farms
- portrayal of family farms as the ideal, versus actual reality today
- economics of intensive agriculture, and the pressures on family farms from economic realities such as vertical integration

The Question of “Alternatives” in Veterinary Training re Large Animals

The existence of problems areas in any domain of veterinary medicine raises ethical issues of several kinds. Personal ethical commitments to helping animals are, of course, relevant. Beyond the personal realm, though, professional veterinary ethics is also a realm committed to “the relief of animal suffering”—this commitment is explicitly called out in the AVMA’s Veterinarian’s Oath taken by all graduates of American veterinary schools.

Consider, then, how a commitment to find alternatives to harmful practices not only in day-to-day veterinary situations but *also in education* is thus a natural topic in an “ethics” class or anywhere else the issue of morality is raised—such questions ask about the possibility of finding less harmful ways of working with production animals. If an alternative can be found, fewer harmful consequences can be generated (and maybe the same benefits can still be obtained). In some ways, **the search for alternatives reflects the essence of ethical behavior** because it is dedicated to looking for ways to eliminate unnecessary harms to living beings.

Consider these issues as you read the article written by Dr. Rasmussen, the Director of Surgery and Clinical Skills at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Western University of Health Sciences—how representative is her approach of the profession’s long-standing commitments to both science and ethics? Are there ways that traditional educational practices involving large animals can be both effective and compassionate?

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