

Development of a New Curriculum in Veterinary Ethics

Jim Bee Team Award 2009 - Final Report

29th September 2011

Prof Stephen May

Prof Christopher Wathes

Mr Martin Whiting

The purpose of this Jim Bee team project was to develop a new curriculum in veterinary ethics for BVetMed students at the RVC, and in doing so create resources and learning materials that can be used on other courses at the RVC and set the RVC apart as a leading body in veterinary ethics. The former has been established and run for two years, the latter is fully underway.

Purpose

Veterinary ethics crosses all aspects of professional veterinary activity and as a broad subject it is a system of moral principles that apply values and judgements to the practice of veterinary medicine. As a scholarly discipline, veterinary ethics encompasses its practical application in clinical settings as well as work on its history, philosophy, theology, professionalism and sociology. Veterinary ethics combines veterinary professional ethics and the subject of animal ethics. It can be interpreted as a critical reflection on the provision of veterinary services in support of the profession's responsibilities to animal kind and mankind. The interplay between ethics and law is vital, and with the age of the Veterinary Surgeon's Act 1966 and trends away from self-regulation, it is important to emphasize how public granting of power to veterinary surgeons is fragile, and breaking public trust could result in a change in statute.

Other veterinary colleges in the UK do not display their curricula on veterinary ethics freely, consequently obtaining and using their data as a model to restructure our own was not possible. Colorado State University (CSU), under Prof Rollin, have an available timetable on a substantial course. Three key sources were utilized in the formation of the new curriculum: CSU's timetable in veterinary ethics, and the associated book *An Introduction to Veterinary Ethics* (Rollin 2006), the curriculum advice as provided by the Institute of

Medical Ethics (Stirrat *et al.* 2010) and the core medical text Medical Ethics and Law (Hope *et al.* 2008). Animal Welfare is taught in alternative modules so linking ethics with law and professionalism was a preferred approach, as it is structured in the medical schools. This emphasizes that ethics, law and professionalism are core subjects to be applied by veterinary students to all other subjects they study (irrespective of the involvement of an animal). Rollin criticizes his own curriculum as although substantial, he is concerned by the lack of retention of ethics following examination. Conflicting views of veterinary ethics curricula are published, and approach to content differ widely. For the Institute of Animal Technology (Cooper 2010) a focus on the differing branches of ethics, and normative theory was promoted, but for Massey University a move towards more practical application of ethics was promoted (Mellor 2010). The latter was our preferred option, in preparation for Day One in practice, the education of ethics should be structured towards practical application, with the grounding theory taught through examples of cases.

Problem based learning was also considered to be critical to the training in veterinary ethics, making situations as realistic as possible would prepare the undergraduate, and through group work and consensus forming the student will appreciate the complex communication skills needed in sometimes delicate situations. In order to demonstrate the integrated nature of ethics into the work of veterinary medicine, the curriculum was structured to coincide with those subjects taught in the surrounding weeks. Finally, a model was developed that incorporated all of this and was structured to promote retention in accordance with the “forgetting curve” of revision method.

The Content

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Year 1 | During this year students learn about research methods, regulation of research and an introduction to husbandry. Ethics and law are introduced with a focus on use of animals in research, and the grounding of the subject of veterinary professional history. The ethics of using animals in research is taught. To help the students prepare for their main debates in year 3 a class debate is arranged in group learning: <i>Animal experimentation is more justifiable than animal farming.</i> |
| Year 3 | The core content of the ethics curriculum, linked to clinical cases that are taught in the surrounding strands. This content has a |

highly structured timetable in an attempt to improve logical process and retention.

Year 4 During teaching on Research 2 Projects two further lectures were structured on the process of an ethical review committee and also on research ethics of the acquisition of knowledge.

The Year 3 Structure

To promote discussion, group decision making, oral defense of ideas and retention the new curriculum was structured in 7 repeating week units, on a Wednesday morning. All weeks had the following structure:

- 9:00am** Feedback seminar from previous week's DL
- 10:00am** Lecture on new topic based on previous week's reading and introducing the topic for the DL to follow.
- 11:00am** DL on a case scenario with a PowerPoint presentation to create.
- 12:00pm** Private study to read core topic for next week.

This results in each topic being addressed in different ways over a three week period; the multiple iterations promoting retention. This is displayed in figure 1 below, where each content theme is represented by a letter, and the arrows demonstrate how that content theme is covered each week.

WEEK TIME	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
09:00 Feedback	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
10:00 Lecture	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
11:00 DL	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
12:00 PS	C	D	E	F	G	H	X

Figure 1: The iterations of curricula content over time.

The directed learning problem scenarios are designed so that in a group of six students the common practice problem should be resolved with all in agreement and reasons given on a PowerPoint presentation. In total six different scenarios are resolved with six groups working on each one problem

each week. The following week the students collectively select, through blinded choice, one group to present an oral defense of their scenario, with the other five groups challenging them. Achieving a consensus represents the dynamic skill graduates need to develop in managing interests of themselves, owners, animals and society. The oral defense helps refine their logical reasoning skills through justification of their resolution. It also represents the challenge of external inspection and critique of their process, which follows Hope's (Hope *et al.* 2008) reasoning of defense in front of a disciplinary hearing.

Outcomes

The teaching resources (case scenarios, lectures and reading materials) were the major output of this Jim Bee project. 20 additional books were purchased and shared between Camden and Hawkshead. A Twitter account of @VetEthics was set up and regularly posts on veterinary ethics news. A strong link with the Institute of Medical Ethics has been developed to share content on professionalism and ethics. An MScVetEd project will begin this year analysing the cumulative curricula approach to assess the effectiveness of this format which will aim for a publication in the Journal of Veterinary Medical Education. A website is under development that will provide a resource to other veterinary colleges to use, it will contain regular updates from the @VetEthics and blogs on news and current events in veterinary ethics. This website will promote the RVC as a dynamic educator in the field of this new subject.

References

- Mellor**, 2010. Ethics, expectations and excellence in. *VetScript*, December, pp.6–8.
- Cooper, M.**, 2010. Who would teach ethics? *Animal Technology and Welfare*, 9(3), pp.131–138.
- Hope, T., Savulescu, J. & Hendrick, J.**, 2008. *Medical ethics and law* 2nd ed. Edinburgh, UK: Elsevier Health Sciences.
- Rollin, B.E.**, 2006. *An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics: Theory And Cases, Second Edition* 2nd ed. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Stirrat, G.M. et al.**, 2010. Medical ethics and law for doctors of tomorrow: the 1998 Consensus Statement updated. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 36(1), pp.55–60.