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Ethics and Clinical Practice: A New Course

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Ethics and Clinical Practice—

a New Course

Ethics issues arising in clinical practice are addressed by Ethics 9009, a core course for all students at Penn's School of Veterinary Medicine. The course, first offered in the Fall of 1986, is presented in the format of Ethical Grand Rounds, a technique designed to mimic the medical and surgical discussions students will encounter in their later years at school.

For the last decade, medical students have taken courses dealing with ethics and clinical practice. Veterinary schools just recently have begun to address this issue. "In lectures and laboratories, veterinary students are taught to look for treat animal diseases, relieve pain, and care for livestock to ensure plentiful food products, and they are encouraged to participate in research to advance medical knowledge," said Dr. Sheldon Steinberg, professor of neurology and one of the organizers of the course. "These tasks appear to be quite well defined, yet in practice they are often less clear and judgment is required. The reality is that veterinary medical practice (as every other of life's significant endeavors) requires judgment. That judgment is not restricted to the patient's clinical status and the significance of test results alone but includes questions of the propriety of running those tests, treating or not, of performing euthanasia or not. These judgments must be made because the mere availability of technical or medical means or legal prerogatives is not a sufficient basis for making decisions. Such issues are not stressed in lectures where the emphasis is on identifying diseases and on modes of treatment."

Ethics 9009 acquaints students with the conflicts encountered by practitioners. The six-week course consists of the weekly presentation of a problem, discussion by groups of students and faculty moderators, and a summarization of the viewpoints from the six discussion groups and the clinician presenter.

"As we explore the issue of judgment, we find that more than one position has a measure of 'rightness'," said Dr. Steinberg. "Hence there is a conflict. In this course the topic and the issue of concern is 'Ethics and Clinical Practice—When Good Positions Conflict'"

The purpose of the course is 1) to bring real-life ethical issues to the students' attention, 2) to discuss these and hence encourage students to discover and consider other issues as they arise, 3) to demonstrate that even questions without clear answers require rigorous, clear thinking, 4) to demonstrate that careful and critical exploration of conflicting issues may help us to choose from among the issues, and 5) to demonstrate that listening to opposing views may strengthen our own opinions.

The problems presented by practitioners and faculty members range from the question "Should research animals be used to train veterinary students?" to "Treatment of the terminal cancer patient: how much, how far, and how often?" The participants examined issues such as treating an injured animal brought to the veterinarian by a bystander and it having a) an owner who cannot be reached, b) an owner who owes money for previous treatment, c) an owner who has money for previous treatment, d) a pending research grant, e) a no-fault pestilence, f) a pending research grant, g) a potential lawsuit, h) a pending research grant, i) a pending research grant, j) a pending research grant, k) a pending research grant, l) a pending research grant, m) a pending research grant, n) a pending research grant, o) a pending research grant, p) a pending research grant, q) a pending research grant, r) a pending research grant, s) a pending research grant, t) a pending research grant, u) a pending research grant, v) a pending research grant, w) a pending research grant, x) a pending research grant, y) a pending research grant, z) a pending research grant.

In the first course, problems derived from practice were offered by Drs. F. Rude, W. McDonough, N. Oakley, J. Simms, and H. S. Steinberg. Drs. G. Kaufman, S. Helfand, and S. Schiffer from the faculty presented problems from VHP. The faculty moderators were Drs. Alan Beck, Colin Harvey, Joan Hendricks, Meryl Littman, William Moyer, David Nunemaker, and Robert Orsher.

The course was developed by Dr. Steinberg and Dr. Donald A. Abt, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics. "We hope to interest our alumni and to have them participate in the course," said Dr. Steinberg. "We want them to become involved and to perceive problems encountered in practice to our students. Only if we have a broad practitioner participation can we expose the students to the wide range of ethical dilemmas encountered by practicing veterinarians. I do hope to hear from alumni willing to contribute to this course."