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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 identify and 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 often are 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 also 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 necessarily 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 or change one's own opinion."

The problems presented by practitioners and faculty members ranged 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 course 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 unknown owner who authorized treatment and promises to come by the next day. In another problem the



issue was one of referral, how much testing or explorative surgery should be done when a specific disorder is suspected but its scope is not fully known, and should the case be referred to a teaching hospital which offers more sophisticated tests before or after testing/explorative surgery. Students discussed informed consent and how much and what specific information to give so a decision for the treatment of an animal can be made. Here the students had to deal with the definition of informed consent, which requires the veterinarian to provide information about the nature of the medical condition, the nature and purpose of the proposed treatment and procedures, the likelihood of success, the risks involved or possible side effects, and the alternatives to the procedure and treatment (if any) and their possible consequences. During these discussions it emerged that informed consent is not a simple issue and that the client's perception of the medical reality depends greatly on the veterinarian's presentation of facts as well as the manner in which they are conveyed. The veterinarian's own convictions also play an important role in the client's decision-making process.

The final exam, a take-home essay, required the students to deal with such issues as informed consent, experimental treatment, fees, and a pending research grant. They also had to address the general issue of animal research, the prospect of improved human health, and the importance of professional growth, and they were required to present alternate points of view and their response to them.

"We deliberately offer this course early in the students' veterinary training," said Dr. Steinberg. "They can zero in on the ethical issues unhampered by medical facts. Of course, they are given pertinent medical information within the context of the problem. We want them to be aware that veterinary medical practice requires judgment and that the issues discussed in the course are just the beginning of a career-long concern."

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

ETHICS 9009

Final Examination

Please identify the ethical issue(s) that Dr. Nobell faces. State your solution(s) to those issues and defend your solution(s) against any objection(s) that a reasonable person might raise against your view(s).

Since your understanding of the issues is what we wish to evaluate, you are all to work independently on this case.

Case Presentation

The only bull owned by the Black & White Holstein Stud Service of Freemartin, CT, has become suddenly and mysteriously sterile. The distraught owners seek the advice and service of Dr. Nobell, a well-known and respected veterinarian in this field of medicine. Dr. Nobell diagnoses the disorder and decides that his new corrective surgery might be indicated. Dr. Nobell knows:

1. That the technique has helped 88 percent of the experimental rats he has treated;
2. That only 4 percent of his rats have died;
3. That the existing standard treatment for bulls is very safe, but results are only fair; i.e., about 40 percent of bulls are helped;
4. That his \$4,000 fee for various supplies and professional services is:
 - a. affordable, and
 - b. a modest cost relative to the healthy bull's value;
5. Further, Dr. Nobell knows that his pending research grant would be enhanced if he tests his method on a bull (even if the attempt fails). If successful in rats and bulls, there is reason to believe that this treatment will also be beneficial to humans with a similar problem.

Unhappily, if Dr. Nobell fails, no other treatment will be possible for this bull. Also, any prior treatment will preclude employing this new surgical treatment.

