

Letters to the Editor

Antirabies antibody titers without vaccination

I read with interest the recent *JAVMA* News article¹ on villagers in Peru who had antibodies against rabies virus, despite never having been vaccinated. As a fourth-year veterinary student, my classmates and I were offered an opportunity to enroll in a trial of an experimental rabies vaccine. The experimental protocol involved measuring prevaccination antirabies antibody titers, and I was found to be one of three students in the country with a prevaccination antibody titer. I had no history of being bitten by or in contact with a rabid animal; however, when I was 8 or 9 years old, my father had caught a bat that we kept in a cage until it died. I never touched the bat, but did observe it for prolonged periods.

Several years later, I attended a meeting during which a researcher from the CDC talked about his investigations into the deaths of several spelunkers from rabies. He surmised that bat guano in the caves may have contained the virus and attempted to test his theory by setting out a series of cages containing animals known to develop rabies, such as cats, dogs, skunks, and raccoons. After a waiting period, he discovered that a number of the animals had developed rabies and concluded that the air in a highly contaminated environment might contain the rabies virus.

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1. Cima G. Villagers had rabies antibodies without vaccination. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012;241:681.

Support for law against deceitful practices

We are writing in response to the letters to the editor by Judith LaBounty¹ and Drs. Teachout and Schrader² expressing disappointment that the Iowa legislature passed House File 589, which allows state officials to pursue

criminal charges against individuals who seek jobs in animal agricultural enterprises through deception or false statements so that they can film husbandry practices at these facilities. Contrary to these letter writers, we strongly support House File 589.

In recent years, numerous videos showcasing incidents of animal abuse at agricultural facilities have been posted on public websites. Most of these videos have been obtained by individuals associated with various animal rights organizations. Although there are random cases of animal abuse, we believe that it is inaccurate to suggest that intentional and unrestrained cruelty and brutality is a systemic component of mainstream animal agriculture.

As food animal veterinarians serving large dairy farms and beef herds, we are on family farms for prolonged periods on a daily basis. There is tremendous awareness on these farms about humane handling of livestock, and there have been great strides to improve cow comfort. Many farms participate in animal welfare programs that seek to educate about humane treatment. The National Dairy FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) Program³ is one such example.

Use of false pretenses to obtain undercover videos of animal handling has numerous problems. First, we believe that this is an invasion of privacy and entrapment,

and we fail to see how this practice could be construed as legal without a warrant. If there is reason to suspect violations of animal cruelty laws, the appropriate response is to contact the police or local animal control officials.

Second, many of the most disturbing videos appear to represent footage accumulated over time. Any act of animal cruelty is unacceptable, but bundling separate incidents together in a rapid-fire sequence creates an illusion that these practices are more common than they truly are.

Third, we believe that many of the recorded incidents were prompted by the undercover videographers themselves for the purpose of creating a provocative scene that could be used to negatively influence public opinion. Finally, by intermingling scenes of animal cruelty with normal farming practices, such as milking, the videographers create an inaccurate and distorted representation of the truth, which can lead to viewer confusion.

We believe that the individuals and organizations creating these videos have agendas that go beyond simply eliminating animal cruelty. If these individuals and organizations were genuinely concerned with animal welfare, they would promptly notify the appropriate enforcement agencies following the first animal abuse incident.

In conclusion, we agree that veterinarians should always advo-

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Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor. Letters may not exceed 500 words and 6 references. Letters to the Editor must be original and cannot have been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Not all letters are published; all letters accepted for publication are subject to editing. Those pertaining to anything published in the *JAVMA* should be received within one month of the date of publication. Submission via e-mail (JournalLetters@avma.org) or fax (847-925-9329) is encouraged; authors should give their full contact information, including address, daytime telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address.

Letters containing defamatory, libelous, or malicious statements will not be published, nor will letters representing attacks on or attempts to demean veterinary societies or their committees or agencies. Viewpoints expressed in published letters are those of the letter writers and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policies of the AVMA.

cate for the well-being of livestock, and we agree that there are opportunities for farmers to improve livestock handling. However, invasion of privacy and indicting an entire industry through deceitful practices is inappropriate.

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1. LaBounty J. Duty to act as advocates for animals (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012;241:41-42.
2. Teachout D, Schrader L. Veterinarians should stand against legislation that protects animal abusers in agriculture industry (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012;241:690.
3. National Dairy FARM Program. Available at: www.nationaldairyfarm.com. Accessed Oct 1, 2012.

Those applying to veterinary school should be aware of job prospects

After years of handwringing regarding veterinary labor force needs, clear information is emerging in the form of availability of jobs for new graduates. The recent Facts and Figures article¹ on employment, starting salaries, and educational indebtedness of year-2012 veterinary college graduates reports that 2,410 of the 2,502 (96.3%) respondents to the most recent AVMA survey of fourth-year veterinary students were actively seeking employment in veterinary medicine after graduation. In addition, for 60.3% (1,449/2,404) of those seeking employment, a position in private practice was their first choice. At the time of the survey, however, which was distributed approximately 4 weeks

before graduations, only 547 of the respondents indicated that they had accepted an offer of employment in private practice.

Given that 89.2% of respondents indicated that they expected to have some educational debt at the time of graduation and that mean educational debt for those with debt was \$151,672, the inability to secure a job after graduation would likely result in financial hardship. Thus, I believe that the low percentage of respondents who had accepted a job in private practice suggests that we may have reached a saturation point in the veterinary job market, and the slight decrease in mean full-time starting salaries would support this.

I suggest that private practitioners who are asked to write letters of recommendation for young people applying to veterinary school do so only after providing information on current employment statistics. Veterinary school admissions committees have no particular incentives to share this critical information with prospective veterinarians, who may benefit from a dose of reality to accompany their dream of becoming a veterinarian.

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1. Shepherd AJ, Pikel L. Employment, starting salaries, and educational indebtedness of year-2012 graduates of US veterinary medical colleges. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012;241:890-894.

Thyroid shields: who needs them?

Thyroid shields are not comfortable and can be cumbersome when struggling with an uncoop-

erative pet. However, I am writing to raise awareness about protecting your neck while taking diagnostic radiographs.

In October 2011, I felt a lump at the base of my throat. Following ultrasonography and aspiration of my thyroid gland, papillary carcinoma, a type of thyroid cancer, was diagnosed.

Thyroid cancer is not a common form of cancer, but the number of cases has been increasing over the past few decades. The disease usually strikes women, often in their 30s and 40s. Luckily, most forms of thyroid cancer are treatable, with a > 95% cure rate after total thyroidectomy and radioactive iodine therapy.

Radiation exposure is a known risk factor in the development of many forms of thyroid cancer. Although most increases in cancer rates are associated with high doses of radiation, such as might occur with nuclear disasters or repeated diagnostic imaging of the head and neck, concern may exist for veterinarians and veterinary staff members repeatedly exposed to scatter radiation while taking radiographs of dogs and cats. During my career as a veterinarian, there was a period of several years during which I assisted with radiography on a regular basis.

It has not been documented that thyroid cancer is more common in veterinarians or veterinary staff members, but one of our roles as veterinarians is to stress the importance of preventive medicine. If that's the case, maybe we should protect ourselves and our staff by putting on a thyroid shield.

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