

Letters to the Editor

Ideas for research into feral cat management

In their recent letter to the editor, Gilardi et al¹ argue that trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) programs do not advance the welfare of feral cats or wildlife. I agree that in a perfect world, people would spay and neuter their pet cats and feral cats would not exist. Until then, however, it seems that there are still plenty of ways for segments of the community, including feral cat organizations, to work together.

Feral cats appear in a variety of situations, but information is lacking on factors that allow feral cat colonies to be established or grow in numbers. To get to the root of the problem, research is needed on the origin of feral cats and on whether the origins of feral cats differ among urban, suburban, and rural locations.

Often, local animal control authorities have limited resources to devote to controlling feral cat colonies. In such instances, feral cat organizations could potentially help in the interim until a long-term solution is devised. But, information is needed on whether such cooperative efforts are beneficial in the long run.

Feral cat organizations that manage TNVR programs are ripe for additional research, such as whether these programs affect the number of kittens that end up in foster care or animal shelters. Also, it would be helpful to know whether or how feral cat organizations could work with local agencies in hoarding situations or with local public works departments to help control populations of feral cats in public parks. Finally, it would be useful to know how many veterinarians have benefitted from the surgery experience gained through TNVR programs.

Ultimately, it would be good if, in the interest of public health and wildlife concerns, feral cat organizations would work themselves out of

a job. Until that time, it seems these organizations fill an important gap.

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1. Gilardi K, Gillin C, Greenacre CB, et al. Feral cat policy is about more than cats (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:402–403.

Contributions of veterinary medicine to health research

We would like to applaud Dr. Baker for his commentary “Real Doctors.”¹ Dr. Baker highlights the lack of awareness within the scientific community as a whole and, perhaps more importantly, within the veterinary profession specifically of the contributions veterinarians make toward advancements in biomedical research and human medicine. As Dr. Baker commented, we cannot promote the concept of one health if veterinarians are unaware of their own colleagues’ efforts in so-called alternative veterinary careers.

Dr. Baker acknowledges that most veterinary students are unaware that a veterinarian received the 1996 Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology. Importantly, this is an example of a veterinarian (Doherty) and physician (Zinkernagel) forging a partnership to uncover new aspects of T-cell immunity.² Another lesser-known, yet equally enlightening, example of such a partnership is the historical collaboration between Dr. William Feldman, a

veterinarian, and Dr. H. Corwin Hinshaw, a physician, in demonstrating that tuberculosis could be cured with streptomycin, a revolutionary discovery that altered the course of medical history.³

Dr. Baker has correctly identified that as veterinarians, we are uniquely equipped to provide fresh perspectives that can greatly assist scientists and physicians in the advancement of medical knowledge. He also aptly emphasizes that a veterinary degree alone should enable one to pursue a rigorous scientific career, as is the case for many physician-scientists who pursue research careers armed only with a medical degree. One difference is that in the human medical field there is a clear path for doctors who want to pursue a research career.

Finally, Dr. Baker’s commentary is especially timely, given the impending closure of the New England Primate Research Center this spring. The New England Primate Research Center, affiliated with Harvard Medical School, is one of eight National Primate Centers, and houses one of the oldest NIH-funded comparative pathology training programs in the United States. The strength of the training program, and the handful of other programs like it around the country, is institutional and programmatic support for veterinarians engaged in biomedical research side-by-side with physician-scientists at preeminent research institutions. Advances in AIDS pathogenesis, neurodegen-

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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.

erative diseases, animal welfare, and comparative pathology were supported, and often spearheaded, by veterinarians. One need look no further than the recent publication of a novel gene therapy for HIV to realize the potential of collaborative efforts between veterinarians, basic science researchers, and physician-scientists.⁴ At a time when more veterinary involvement is needed in biomedical research, continued federal and institutional support for such programs is vital.

We agree with Dr. Baker that as veterinarians, the responsibility of continuing to carry the torch of one health falls squarely on our shoulders. It is not enough to just foster awareness within the veterinary profession and to encourage continued integration between the human and veterinary medical communities. We must legitimize and mainstream careers in biomedical sciences within the veterinary profession.

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Martinot, Miller, and Kramer regarding my commentary and I have also received numerous supportive email messages from other veterinary scientists. These researchers are vital in demonstrating the worth of veterinarians in biomedical discovery. They also advance this underserved segment of our profession by mentoring the next generation of veterinary research scientists. But, that is not enough. The future of this segment of our profession depends on action taken by leaders to allocate resources, plan, inspire, and direct our future. By deeds as well as words, those in positions of power must join forces to actively promote veterinary research. Faculty members, veterinary college administrators, and others who support the Meriel Veterinary Scholars Program are leading the way, but it would be good to see this cause promoted by other innovative projects that celebrate and advance veterinary research. Only in this way will students, graduates, scientists, and the public recognize the proud research legacy of veterinary medicine and its pivotal contributions to one health.

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Affective states of animals

Dr. Kipperman hits on some key points in his commentary¹ on the role of the veterinary profession in promoting animal welfare. Particularly relevant, to me, were his comments on the difference between using animals versus caring for them and the difference in moral status conveyed by referring to some species as production animals and others as companion animals. I agree with Dr. Kipperman that the AVMA could benefit from adjusting its point of view.

Dr. Kipperman suggests that animal welfare policies adopted by the AVMA seem to “emphasize physical health to a greater extent than the animals’ mental states or the ability to express natural behaviors.” Because words matter,

perhaps it is time to standardize how we refer to the mental and psychological states of nonhuman animals or, to use the term I prefer, their affective states.

I often see what appears to be resistance to the notion that non-companion animals have affective states. I understand the resistance to ascribe complex human emotional states such as love to animals. Philosophers, human mental health professionals, and those who otherwise think about human emotive states seem to be at a loss when attempting to define and explain love, so it should not be surprising that many veterinary professionals reject the notion that animals can express love. However, it seems obvious that sentient animals can on some level experience less complex affective states such as fear and anxiety. Perhaps the veterinary profession could begin to recognize and accept that animals have affective states by starting with fear and working from there.

My pathway toward credentialing by the American College of Animal Welfare has changed my perceptions of the role affective states of animals should play in our development of attitudes, policies, and guidelines. I believe that we should not rely solely on our own emotional responses to animal welfare, sometimes referred to as a touchy-feely perspective, but rather seek to use our scientific expertise in attempting to understand how we can best be advocates for and leaders in animal welfare.

We are the experts in animal welfare. It’s past time for us to start leading.

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1. Baker HJ. Real doctors. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:406–407.
2. Zinkernagel RM, Doherty PC. H-2 compatibility requirements for T-cell-mediated lysis of target cells infected with lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus. Different cytotoxic T-cell specificities are associated with structures coded for in H-2K or H-2D. *J Exp Med* 1975;141:1427–1436.
3. Feldman WH, Hinshaw HC. The in vivo sensitivity of streptomycin of recently isolated strains of human tubercle bacilli. *Am J Pathol* 1946;22:640.
4. Gardner MR, Kattenhorn LM, Kondur HR, et al. AAV-expressed eCD4-Ig provides durable protection from multiple SHIV challenges. *Nature* 2015;519:87–91.

The author responds:

I greatly appreciate the thoughtful comments from Drs.

1. Kipperman BS. The role of the veterinary profession in promoting animal welfare. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:502–504.

Public trust in the accreditation process

In his critique¹ of my commentary² arguing that accreditation of colleges of veterinary medicine should be the purview of an independent entity, not the AVMA

Council on Education (COE), Dr. Matushek misstates my argument and ignores a principal recommendation of the Institute of Medicine's report on conflicts of interest in medicine and education.³ My commentary noted that both the AVMA and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) have secondary interests that conflict with the primary interest of providing a fair and rigorous process for accreditation of institutions granting veterinary degrees. These secondary interests include financial relationships with individuals and entities that would benefit from accreditation decisions as well as the obvious interest AAVMC members have in the continued accreditation of existing colleges of veterinary medicine. Contrary to Dr. Matushek's assertion, I did not argue, nor do I believe, that "conflicts of interest are evidence of bias or wrongdoing," that "individual COE members share the same conflicts held by the AVMA," or that "conflicts of interest can be eliminated."

Those arguments obscure a major recommendation in the Institute of Medicine report³ that is fundamental to achieving broad public confidence in accreditation decisions: "The second purpose of conflict of interest policies—to help sustain public confidence in professional judgment—is less appreciated but no less important. Here the goal is to minimize conditions that would cause reasonable individuals to suspect that professional judgment has been improperly influenced by secondary interests, whether or not it has." Also, "Policies designed to reduce conflicts of interest and mitigate their impact provide an important foundation for public confidence in medical professionals and institutions."

My proposal is an effort to minimize, not eliminate, conflicts of interest in the accreditation of colleges of veterinary medicine. I freely acknowledge that my suggestion of a mechanism to appoint an oversight board could be improved

on and that conflicts of interest could be further reduced. Presidents of institutions that include veterinary colleges may not be the best group to choose members of an independent accrediting entity, and the involvement of professional organizations such as state veterinary medical associations would be valuable. By all means, let's have that discussion. But Dr. Matushek's suggestion of managing these conflicts does not acknowledge a key conclusion of the Institute of Medicine's report: that it may be necessary to eliminate certain conflicts to reduce the risk of bias or the loss of public trust. Arguing that we should not improve the system because we cannot make it perfect is not particularly helpful and is also unlikely, in my view, to restore broad confidence in veterinary college accreditation.

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1. Matushek KJ. Conflicted by conflicts of interest. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:601–602.
2. Kotlikoff MI. Why the AVMA's Council on Education should be an independent entity. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:599–600.
3. Committee on Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice; Board on Health Sciences Policy; Institute of Medicine. Principles for identifying and assessing conflicts of interest. In: Lo B, Field MJ, eds. *Conflict of interest in medical research, education, and practice*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2009;44–61.

Dr. Matushek responds:

Dr. Kotlikoff argues that secondary interests of the AVMA and Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) create a risk that the professional judgments and actions of the Council on Education (COE) could be unduly influenced. Yet, he describes no compelling mechanism by which those interests could have such an effect. Neither the AVMA nor the AAVMC votes on accreditation mat-

ters. Rather, decisions are made by the individual volunteer members of the COE. Secondary interests of the AVMA and AAVMC affect those decisions only to the extent that the individual members of the COE share those interests.

I apologize if I mistakenly interpreted Dr. Kotlikoff's statements that the profession should develop an accreditation system "free from such conflicts of interest" made up of individuals with "a lack of any apparent conflicts of interest" as suggesting that he wanted to eliminate, rather than merely minimize, conflicts of interest. Regardless, my point remains. Any entity with sufficient expertise to accredit colleges of veterinary medicine would be subject to its own conflicts of interest. Turning accreditation over to an independent entity would not reduce conflicts but simply trade one set of conflicts for another. The end result would not be a better process for accreditation, just a different one.

Contrary to Dr. Kotlikoff's assertion, I have never argued that "we should not improve the [current accreditation] system." Continuous improvement has, in fact, been a hallmark of the COE accreditation process, and the AVMA and COE should continue to identify ways to minimize the risk that accreditation decisions could be influenced by secondary interests. The AVMA Board of Directors and COE have made several major changes in recent years in this regard.¹ Could more be done? Possibly so, and I welcome that discussion. But to throw over a system that has served the profession so well for so many decades in favor of an untested system that will itself be beset by the same problems seems to make little sense.

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1. Major changes the COE has made in the past few years. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2015;246:570–571.