

Letter to the Editor

People are people

The recent *JAVMA* News article¹ on efforts by the Nonhuman Rights Project to have chimpanzees recognized as legal persons raises interesting concerns we, as veterinary professionals, need to consider. Animal welfare and animal rights are closely related, but not identical. Whereas animal rights advocates would likely embrace all of the concepts that fall under the umbrella of animal welfare, the reverse is not necessarily so.

I thought it interesting that, according to the article, bioethics professor Peter Singer has argued for granting rights to certain species (ie, cognitively sophisticated animals), but has also advocated the rejection of speciesism. I find these two positions to be contradictory, in that awarding special moral status to some species but not others, as Dr. Singer has proposed, seems to be itself an example of speciesism.

Discussions of the moral status of animals are mostly philosophical and legal, and one could question why veterinarians should be concerned about the debates of philosophers and lawyers. However, I envision a day when, if animals are awarded legal personhood status, professional liability awards, both legitimate and frivolous, and insurance costs could go through the roof and considerations of pain and suffering could trump standard-of-care defenses in the eyes of some judges and juries.

Beyond these concerns, however, is our obligation to be leaders in the discussion of animal welfare issues. I believe that the first step should be to steer the focus of discussion back to the welfare of animals and away from animal rights. Although there is some overlap and areas for legitimate discussion and disagreement, I believe we need to avoid language related to animal rights and concentrate on language related to animal welfare. We need to recognize and address the important fact that the moral status of animals is foundational

for many animal welfare issues, and how we articulate possible solutions for animal welfare questions is critical to our role in these discussions. Our leadership in this area is essential to our own profession and the clients and animals we serve. We are experts in animal welfare,

and we need to start acting and talking more like experts.

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1. Nolen RS. One of us: novel strategy aims at getting chimpanzees recognized as legal persons. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2014;244:248–252.

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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.

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