Perspectives in Professional Education

Introducing a course in veterinary medicine and literature into a veterinary curriculum

Elizabeth A. Stone, DVM, MS, MPP, DACVS and Hilde A. Weisert, MS

Life skills, such as communication, emotional acumen, and ethical decision-making, are recognized as crucial components for career satisfaction and success in the veterinary profession.\textsuperscript{1-3} The value of these skills was recently reaffirmed in the large survey\textsuperscript{4} of veterinarians commissioned by the AVMA, the American Animal Hospital Association, and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. The majority (87\%) of private practitioners agreed that personal interaction and communication skills are required for the successful practitioner. However, the skills of new graduates in these areas were considered marginal by 55\% of practice owners. Likewise, 83\% of non-practice veterinarians and 30\% of practicing veterinarians regarded written communication as a required skill, but more than half of those veterinarians deemed the writing skills of new graduates to be marginal. Overall, practicing veterinarians felt that new graduates were not trained sufficiently in areas of communication.\textsuperscript{5} These results mirrored what was presented more than a decade ago in a study\textsuperscript{6} conducted by the Pew Health Professions Commission. In that survey of 171 small animal veterinarians and 129 large animal veterinarians, > 50\% believed that it was very important for veterinary schools to provide training in communication and involve clients in their animals’ care. However, < 50\% thought that the schools did an excellent or good job in providing training for communicating effectively with clients and responding to the diverse needs and values of different cultural and ethnic groups.

Training in emotional support of clients is also considered a valuable skill for veterinary professionals. Understanding the human-animal bond helps veterinarians understand the emotional needs of their clients and may increase the quality of services provided by veterinarians and contribute to overall success in private practice.\textsuperscript{7} In a survey of fourth-year veterinary students, 45\% of female respondents and 21\% of male respondents strongly agreed that training in emotional needs of clients was valuable. Only 30\% of the students believed they received adequate training in this area.\textsuperscript{8} Fourth-year veterinary students also believed that although understanding the human-animal bond is an important part of the emotional support of clients, this bond is not adequately discussed in the veterinary curriculum. In fact, the importance of the human-animal bond seems to decrease as students progress in veterinary school.\textsuperscript{9}

Ethical decision-making is another important area that falls outside the traditional medical and scientific curriculum. Students were tested at the beginning and end of their veterinary medical education, and normally expected increases in moral reasoning did not occur over the four years of veterinary medical education.\textsuperscript{10} These results suggest that the veterinary medical educational experience for these students somehow inhibited their moral reasoning ability, rather than facilitated it.

The best ways to help students acquire the life skills necessary for career success have not been identified. One approach, pioneered by Coles\textsuperscript{11} and used successfully in human medicine, is the integration of literary texts into medical curricula. These literary texts are regarded as rich resources to help medical students and doctors explore issues of communication, emotional support, and ethical practice. In 1998, 74\% (93/125) of US medical schools taught literature and medicine, with this being part of a required course in 39\% of the medical schools. In support of these initiatives, there is an online literature and medicine Web site,\textsuperscript{12} a journal (Medicine and Literature), and a burgeoning field of narrative medicine.\textsuperscript{13} Careful examination of literary works has also been used to address moral and ethical choices and issues in schools of nursing and business.\textsuperscript{14,15}

We were intrigued with the potential for using a similar approach with veterinary students. To our knowledge, literature has not been incorporated into the veterinary medical curricula to foster communication, enhance understanding and empathy, facilitate ethical inquiry, and explore the human-animal bond. The purpose of this article is to present a model for such a course in medicine and literature for veterinary students and to report the encouraging results of a postcourse survey aimed at assessing how well the course met these course objectives.

An elective veterinary medicine and literature course was conducted at the College of Veterinary Medicine, North Carolina State University, in the spring of 2002 and 2003. The week-long course was developed and taught by a veterinary surgeon (EAS) and a poet (HAW). The course objectives were to enhance understanding and empathy towards clients,
other veterinarians, and staff: understand the personal connection between clients and their animals and between the veterinarian and their patients; reflect on what it means to be a good veterinarian; and renew their purpose (to remember why they wanted to be a veterinarian).

Development of the course posed some unexpected challenges. The initial idea was for the course to encompass many of the same issues as in the human medicine and literature curricula, with the adaptation, deletion, and addition of specific topics. As a case in point, the doctor-human patient relationship was expanded into three relationships: the doctor-patient relationship, the doctor-client relationship, and the relationship between the doctor and the client-animal relationship. However, the volume and range of possible selections soon became too great for a week-long course and too wide-ranging to shape into a coherent whole. For example, at least eight collections of poems about dogs had been published in the last three years. In addition to the course instructors, another faculty member and the dean of the college, each of whom had special interests related to the course content, participated as guest speakers. The university chancellor recommended a reading that had influenced her to become a scientist.

A survey was completed by 18 of the 19 participating students on the last day of the course. Questions focused on assessment of the objectives for the course using a Likert scale of one (low) to five (high). When the 18 students were asked to what extent they had reflected on what it means to be a good veterinarian in the week before the class, only five students responded with a score of four or five (Table 1). When asked about the extent of reflection on being a good veterinarian during the class week, all 18 students responded with a score of four or five. Comments included, “The discussion and thought process that resulted were very reflective and sparked new ideas,” “I’ve never read James Herriot before…the stories enhanced my awareness of client relationships,” “Absolutely…opened up a whole new line of thinking and processing for me,” and “Made me realize the importance of my imagination in veterinary medicine.”

Ten students reported that their understanding and empathy towards clients, other veterinarians, and staff would be affected by what they read and discussed during the week. Comments included, “Just understanding the different perspectives of people was a great lesson. A lot of the readings stressed the intensity of human-animal bonds that exist,” it is “…important to remember that others may be suffering even if all is well with you,” and “The readings from the perspective of pet owners particularly helped reinforce this feeling.”

Sixteen of the 18 students thought that their thinking about personal connections between the clients and their animals, and the veterinarian and their patients had been stimulated during the week. Comments

---

**Table 1—Student (n = 18) perceptions of a veterinary medicine and literature course**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>1 (little or not at all)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (greatly)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Will your understanding and empathy toward clients, other veterinarians, and staff be affected by what you have read and discussed this week?</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Was your thinking about the personal connections between the clients and their animals and the veterinarians and their patients stimulated this week?</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. [Before class] To what extent had you reflected on “what it means to be a good veterinarian” in the week before the class?</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. [After class] To what extent have you reflected on this during the week of the course?</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Likert scale response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 (quite detached from sense of purpose)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (strongly connected with sense of purpose)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (strongly connected with sense of purpose)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
included. “I think hearing the perspectives from physicians made me more aware of the unique bond veterinarians have with their patients;” “The readings, and even of greater importance, the discussions brought to light how differently people view their animals, both as veterinarians and as owners;” “The personal stories and poetry really confirmed the strength of the human-animal bond for me;” “This course brought some of the humanity, kindness, and emotion into my veterinary school training and experience;” and “...helped me become more attuned to where the veterinarian fits into the human-animal bond.”

Twelve students reported a strengthened sense of purpose (remembering why they wanted to be a veterinarian) at the end of the course. Five other students had a strong sense of purpose before the course began, and this did not change during the course. One first-year student commented, “Vet school kills any excitement about being a vet. This course was very refreshing.” Another commented, “It’s nice to reconnect with why I wanted to come to vet school.”

Other benefits that the students described included “a visit with my long-lost friend, creativity;” “I thank you for reminding me of my artistic side and making me remember to pay attention to it;” “great to get to see different perceptions of veterinary medicine. Also, poetry brought new light to the human-animal bond;” and “group interaction with people I normally just talk science with. It’s nice to see other sides and get to know people better.” Students also commented, “I don’t think that veterinary students get to do enough critical thinking in their education (at least in the first two years) and this is definitely an exercise in thinking.” “It succeeded in rejuvenating the spirit.” “It provides a forum for discussing ethics, feelings—a place where you can learn from others’ opinions and views,” and “It has allowed me to realize that I am as passionate about my chosen profession as I was when I entered school (although three years of classes may have convinced me otherwise.)” A third-year student commented, “I found it incredibly helpful for me to have this experience before starting my clinical rotations in a week.”

All students responded to the assignment to find and write a story of their own with surprisingly uniform enthusiasm. Although the assignment was framed loosely, suggesting that students who did not want to write could present a story visually or in some other form, everyone produced a written work from two to five pages. In most instances, students seemed to have had a personal story they had been waiting for the chance to write; no one complained of lack of a topic. When students read their stories, the others listened attentively to each other’s narratives. From their responses, we believe that the opportunity to share their own experiences—specifically as stories rather than just passing anecdotes—was one of the most meaningful parts of the class. As one of the students wrote, “I read through all the wonderful essays the people in our group wrote. I was so impressed by all the incredible imagery each person was able to convey, and it gave me an insight into these gifted people and also just a connection to the person or the group, which is so important in this life we lead.”

Students also appreciated the opportunity to work with a clinician in a less formal setting. They also valued the new kind of interaction with the guest speakers (the dean and faculty member-author) and the chance to discuss readings recommended by the university chancellor.

Case presentations and discussions play a major role in the veterinary curriculum in helping students learn to integrate client information with physical examination and laboratory data. However, in case studies, the students can become so focused on the medical problem that they disregard the fact that there is a whole animal and person involved. The human-animal interaction may not be mentioned, particularly in regard to diversity in cultural background, communication styles, and the relative importance of animals. In our veterinary medicine and literature course, students experienced complex situations that engaged their emotions, such as empathy or discomfort. The readings portrayed social circumstances that are usually deleted or not even identified in the traditional case histories. Readings about difficult decisions made by doctors and veterinarians allowed us to discuss errors, ambivalence, and dislike of patients (or their owners) without reference to an existing situation. The readings and discussions also increased their awareness of issues and experiences they may not have encountered or even imagined.

In human medicine, the study of literature has been used to foster the ethical thinking of students as they grapple with the daily challenges of medicine. Professors of these medicine-literature courses explain that literature may suggest “responses without dictating them, urge behaviors without ordering, illuminate values without oversimplifying them.” In addition to evaluating how medical decisions are made, ethical inquiry can be directed at the kind of life being lived by an individual. As Coles’ has emphasized, literature can cause us to reflect on our own lives and ask, “How do you balance your business life and your home life? How do you resist the temptation to become callous and selfish? How do you hold to moral and religious values in the face of all sorts of challenges at work? What happens to people, emotionally and spiritually, when they compromise certain important principles and start down the road of rationalizations and self-justifications? [Literature] helps us to shape a general attitude toward living a life—encouraging us to think about what we want and at what personal or professional cost.”

The standard format for teaching veterinary ethics is through didactic lectures with small-group discussion. In one study, of veterinary students in an ethics course, no substantial improvement in ethical thinking was found after the course, as determined by standardized pre- and post-testing. Thus, additional modalities for becoming familiar with ethical issues may be warranted. During the veterinary medicine and literature course, the students reflected on what it means to be a good veterinarian, addressing ethical issues faced by the characters in the readings. Formal assessment of the student’s abilities for ethical thinking was not performed, and we are not suggesting that a medicine-lit-
erature course could substitute for an ethics course. However, literary selections could be included to foster discussion of important issues.

We also wanted to use literature to enhance understanding and empathy towards clients, coworkers, and employees. The veterinary students valued the opportunity to explore different perspectives and discuss the reasons behind those viewpoints. In human medicine, literature has been used to enable medical residents to develop greater empathy and generate creative approaches to managing patients. The study of literary works has increased physician empathy, reduced frustration, improved physician-patient communication, and enabled physicians to develop new interaction and intervention strategies, with resultant improvements in patient’s outcomes.

Having an appreciation for the human-animal bond is critical for the success and positive self-image of veterinarians. In a recent study, it was reported that the human-animal bond was important to veterinary students and that students attached differing values to some aspects of the human-animal bond. The authors proposed that human-animal bond material should be presented in a manner that allows them to understand the bond in a variety of settings and different career choices. In our experience, reading and discussing the wide range of stories and poems dealing with the human-animal bond provide a natural, open-ended way of accomplishing this. Poems by Denise Levertov, Maxine Kumin, Mark Doty, and Molly Peacock give vivid pictures of the varieties of the human-animal relationship and its importance in diverse lives.

The Herriot readings in particular demonstrate that when a veterinarian respects and reinforces the bond between the animal and its owner, a unique bond is created between the client and the veterinarian. Indeed, Herriot's stories were a continuing thread in the class, with one or two fitting in well with almost every one of our themes. One might assume that students would have read Herriot earlier in their lives and conclude that revisiting these stories would be of little value. Instead, regardless of what they had read previously, students came to these stories with a sense of discovery and a unique connection with the young, reflective veterinarian. Before the class, many students had the impression of Herriot as an amiable country doctor who does no wrong. On the contrary, they discovered a complex, fallible individual with whom they readily identified. The Herriot stories were frequently cited as the most memorable and affecting readings of everyone of our themes. One might assume that students would have read Herriot earlier in their lives and conclude that revisiting these stories would be of little value. Instead, regardless of what they had read previously, students came to these stories with a sense of discovery and a unique connection with the young, reflective veterinarian. Before the class, many students had the impression of Herriot as an amiable country doctor who does no wrong. On the contrary, they discovered a complex, fallible individual with whom they readily identified. The Herriot stories were frequently cited as the most memorable and affecting readings of the course.

We also used the rich literature about animals to speak to our students. Many of the poems emphasized the importance of animals and of learning from animals and their more direct connection to the natural world. In areas of death and grief, the readings did not always deal directly with the death of an animal, but may have used animal images to explore these feelings.

Two unexpected topics emerged from the discussions with students about the readings: consideration of the similarities and differences between veterinarians and physicians, and exploring diverse cultures and backgrounds. Veterinary students found that articles written by medical doctors about their personal experiences were particularly helpful, relevant, and often moving. In the book, Complications, a surgery resident describes his struggles in learning to be a surgeon, “In surgery, as in everything else, skill and confidence are learned through experience—haltingly and humiliatingly...the floundering followed by fragments, followed by knowledge and occasionally a moment of elegance...” Reading about the surgery resident's trials as he learned to do surgery led to a discussion about the common feelings of apprehension when learning new skills. In contrast, some of the works helped students realize the uniqueness of their chosen profession. As opposed to physicians, veterinarians seldom blame their patients for their illnesses. Also unlike physicians, most veterinarians deal with their patients through their complete lifecycle, with death an expected and integral part. As was illustrated in the readings, the ability (and responsibility) for euthanasia of their patients is both a benefit and a hardship for veterinarians.

In the veterinary medicine and literature course, students were able to talk about different values placed on animals by people in different cultures. Stories in diverse settings can challenge students' values and broaden their world views. Veterinarians need to appreciate the growing diversity of our population and the need to understand different cultural values.

Considering the location of most veterinary schools and the minimal interactions between students and minority cultures, preparing our graduates for these important changes will require extremely innovative approaches. Literature may help students to see their roles both inside and outside the profession within broader cultural and emotional contexts. As veterinary schools revise curricula to incorporate the reality of cultural diversity, professors can help achieve this objective by the use of literature.

The students who enrolled in this course were self-selected and all were very receptive and appreciative of the opportunity to reflect on experiences they were having in veterinary school or at veterinary practices where they worked. Students with a liberal arts background relished the opportunity to read something other than medical textbooks and to discuss ideas and feelings. Whether or not all students would have the same positive experience in a required medicine-literature course was not investigated. As with other elective opportunities, one must consider the possibility that only those least in need of such a course are likely to participate.

Who can adopt this type of course? In our curriculum, we have the opportunity for one-week intensive courses. At other schools, veterinary medicine and literature could be an optional seminar for faculty and students, a monthly discussion group for clinical residents, or a part of orientation, with optional follow-up meetings to renew personal and literary connections. Practitioners could implement reading groups in their own associations or as web discussions and might use literature as an additional teaching tool in practice-based externships. Engagement with literature has the possibility of fostering a mentor relationship because it
adds a dimension for interaction between mentor and those being mentored. We are convinced from the human medicine reports and from our own experience that the effort will be worthwhile. To support an exchange of ideas with others interested in introducing such courses into the veterinary medical curriculum, the authors have recently founded The Society for Veterinary Medicine and Literature. 19

The course model itself is highly adaptable. The organizing themes provide a flexible scheme around which specific selections can be added or removed to accommodate local concerns, emerging issues, and new writings, without losing coherence or focus. Invitations to college faculty and administrators for recommended readings and to participate as guest speakers are likely to yield similarly serendipitous discoveries of literary passions and provide new kinds of educational engagement.

References