Principles of veterinary bioethics

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The term bioethics was first used in 1971 by physician V. R. Potter to link biological science with ethics and to demonstrate how bioethics can serve as a bridge linking disciplines such as medicine and ecology. He was concerned that medical ethics was too narrow in scope to deal with the complex, multidisciplinary health issues facing the medical profession. Bioethics has applications in many fields of human activity, from agriculture to conservation, and from community planning to public education. Veterinary medical ethics deals with professional standards of practice, business, and behavior and addresses the welfare of animals, as defined by law, from the perspectives of economics and scientific objectivity.

Veterinary bioethics has a broader scope than veterinary medical ethics, being applied to evaluating the treatment and care of animals, in setting optimal welfare standards, and in determining what is best for animals from the perspectives of medicine (disease prevention and treatment) and ethology (behavioral and related physiologic, psychologic, and environmental requirements). Veterinary bioethics therefore serves as an ethical compass for the use of animals in society where humaneness has inherent moral value in the currency of any civil society. It is based on the absolute and universal ethic of compassion and the principle of ahimsa, avoidance of harm or injury. The primary areas of veterinary bioethical application are the following: animal health and well-being; environmental health and quality as they relate to how animals are housed and husbanded and how animals impact the environment; and human interests (financial, emotional, and public health) and responsibilities under the local, national, and international laws, statutes, and conventions as they pertain to the preceding areas. Bioethics also considers the consequences of various initiatives, new products, treatments, husbandry systems, and animal uses; this consequentialist perspective provides the prescience that is so often lacking in simplistic cost-risk-benefit determinations.

Advocacy for the abolition of all forms of animal cruelty and inadequate care resulting in physical harm, psychologic distress, and suffering can be facilitated by putting bioethics into practice. Veterinary medical ethics essentially mandates that the best scientific knowledge and medical and surgical expertise be provided to animals on their owner's request and payment for professional services. Veterinary bioethics has a different, but not necessarily conflicting, mandate to evaluate the client's request in terms of the patient's best interests, when the client's request may prolong the animal's suffering and the alternative of euthanasia should be considered and when the client is unable or unwilling to remove the animal from conditions where stress, distress, injury, and suffering are likely to recur, such as with most intensive systems of commercial animal production. In the latter such instances, veterinary medical ethics cannot effectively address these concerns by only focusing on the best medical and scientific approach to disease prevention and stress reduction, especially when costs of treating animals on an individual basis are prohibitive. Veterinary bioethics provides a more holistic approach to this dilemma.

The veterinary profession may or may not appear to be unconcerned or pandering to vested interests when bioethical considerations are not part of the decision-making process for how animals should be treated and disease and suffering prevented. Examples of where the application of veterinary bioethics is called for include nontherapeutic use of antimicrobials and other production-enhancing drugs; the use of analgesics to enable lame horses to be raced; and new developments such as organ transplants for companion animals, animal cloning, and the creation of transgenic animals.

Veterinarians are first and foremost practical professionals, applying the ideals as well as the science and art of healing to their animal patients. Unlike physicians, however, their idealism and healing practices are profoundly influenced by two factors: the nature of the bond between the animal and the primary caregiver or owner and the value of the animal, inferred by financial, emotional, and other investments. This means that because all animals are not valued and, therefore, not treated equally, veterinary services and clients' demands and expectations will vary considerably. Hence, the best interests of animals may not be served with any consistency by the veterinary profession because of the inherent inconsistencies in human-animal relationships. This is beyond the purview of conventional veterinary medical ethics that has, historically, been more service oriented than animal centered. Such inconsistencies do not necessarily mean that the central ideal of veterinary bioethics, which is humane treatment, cannot be applied consistently to all categories of animal valuation and use so...
that all animals are given equally fair consideration and are treated humanely.

Thus, regardless of the economic limitations on the kinds and quality of service that veterinarians provide to their animal patients and clients, the ideal of preventing and alleviating animals’ physical pain and psychologic suffering (that drew most caring individuals into the profession in the first place) does not have to be sacrificed. On the contrary, it is part of the service and duty of the veterinary profession, which can be allied with other disciplines such as animal welfare science; law; ethology; and environmental, public health, and wildlife conservation medicine.

As a service profession to the animal industries (such as livestock, aquaculture, horse racing, and circus entertainment), organized veterinary medicine is beginning to help in the adoption of various welfare standards and also in bringing in some of the aforementioned disciplines when appropriate. This is a necessary evolution of interdisciplinary collaboration because of the demands and challenges of maximizing animals’ utility while meeting the ethical and social responsibilities of optimizing animal health, welfare, and overall well-being. Such evolution means applying, where relevant, the bioethical perspective of social progress as the sum of human, animal, and environmental health and well-being. Examples include finding alternatives to the nontherapeutic use of antimicrobials, anabolic steroids, and other drugs, especially parasiticides, in food animal production that can have adverse environmental and public health consequences; developing more humane methods of animal husbandry, transportation, and slaughter; adopting better systems of animal waste management; implementing more sustainable agricultural practices; and improving food safety, quality, and security.

Likewise, in the wake of substantial progress in preventive medicine, veterinarians in companion animal practice are addressing the dynamics of the human-animal bond that now demand more emphasis on client education, wellness examinations, and treatment and prevention of behavioral and emotional problems. Issues like routinely docking dogs’ tails and declawing cats are concerns that call for bioethical review rather than better analgesics. Close review of many scenarios and case histories in veterinary practice clearly demonstrates the relevance of bioethics in addressing moral dilemmas and client or owner difficulties.

The basic bioethical principles of optimal animal care, humane husbandry, and animal welfare are included in the four pillars of holistic preventive medicine for domestic animals and captive wildlife, namely right breeding (to avoid inherited disorders); right nutrition; provision of the right environment; and the right understanding of animals’ physical, sociobehavioral, and emotional needs. It is ethically consistent to regard these four principles of human and humane responsibility as also being fundamental animal rights and aids in the avoidance of the moral inversion of justifying animal suffering as an unavoidable necessity. These principles therefore help establish a common ground between those advocating improved animal welfare in reaction to public opinion and those more proactively involved in animal protection. The so-called animal rights movement would be better termed the animal liberation movement because the groups’ abolitionist agenda may prohibit any use of animals, essentially overriding constructive reforms through the voluntary adoption or legislated enforcement of animals’ basic rights. As a rational species with moral sensibility, we have high ideals like the Golden Rule (do to others what you would have them do to you) that we strive to live up to. When examined from the perspective of bioethics, extending the Golden Rule to include the environment and all sentient beings is simply enlightened self-interest.

As arbiters between society and animals, veterinarians in private practice and various branches of government, research, and teaching, as well as organized veterinary medicine with ties to government and industry (such as the American and British veterinary associations) face new challenges, demands, and responsibilities in an ever-changing world where ethics and compassion can no longer be shortchanged by vested interests, custom, commerce, or convenience. Although animal exploitation, cruelty, and suffering have been normative in most cultures for millennia, the evolution of society toward a more enlightened, empathetic, and compassionate regard for animals and the natural environment—the life community—is in process. The veterinary profession in developed and developing countries is part of this process as an interlocutor between human interests, animal interests, and the greater good, rather than as a service profession preserving the status quo of animal use where there is documented abuse and suffering. In terms of professional development, personal fulfillment, and the social status of veterinarians, veterinary bioethics can make a substantial contribution by applying the compass of compassion to guide us and others in our work for the benefit of animals and society.

References