Vet Record

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Telling their own stories: Encouraging veterinary students to ethically reflect

Pru Hobson-West[1] ⦿ | **Kate Millar**[2] ⦿

[1] School of Sociology and Social Policy, and School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

[2] Centre for Applied Bioethics, School of Biosciences and School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Correspondence
Pru Hobson-West, School of Sociology and Social Policy, and School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, Law and Social Sciences Building, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.
Email: Pru.Hobson-West@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract
Background: Veterinary practice raises complex and unique professional ethical dilemmas. There is increasing discussion of how best to deliver ethics education to veterinary students, so that they are fully prepared to address ethical conflicts in professional practice. This paper proposes the use of innovative methods to allow students to share and reflect on their own experiences of ethical dilemmas.
Methods: Two innovations are described. The first is formal and compulsory, and involves a small-group facilitated session for final year students, wholly designed around student dilemmas. The second is informal and voluntary, and constitutes a short-story writing competition.
Results: The methods described are conducive to student engagement in ethics and ethical reflection.
Conclusion: Veterinary schools should consider adopting student-led techniques, deliberately designed to allow students to tell their own stories. Similar methods could also be adapted for use in clinical practice, thereby creating opportunities for professional dialogue on ethical dilemmas.

KEYWORDS
education, ethics, veterinary profession
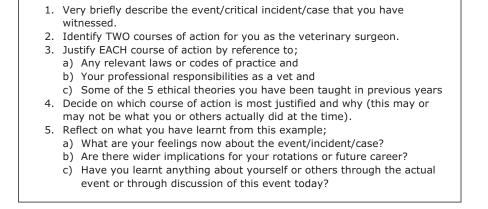
1 | INTRODUCTION

Veterinary practice can often feel like a 'moral maze'[1] of ethical dilemmas.[2–4] Indeed, empirical research in the UK identified that vets in practice face ethical dilemmas at least weekly.[2] Interestingly, increasing length of time in practice does not equate to improved ethical reasoning skills,[5] nor does it reduce the 'moral stress'[6] that ethical dilemmas can create. UK, European and North American Veterinary Federations have defined ethics as a core competency, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) recommends that veterinary schools 'teach ethics and value issues to promote high standards of conduct and maintain the integrity of the profession'.[7] A study of small animal veterinarians in the United States reported mixed views about the value of ethics training,[6] but other studies of current students[8,9] and alumni[10] report more positive attitudes.

Most published research focuses on the *why* of veterinary ethics teaching, and whether the goal should be to teach students rules, develop virtues or enable skills.[11] Less attention has been devoted to the *how*,[9,12] although comparative work has shown major differences between European countries.[13] This contrasts with a vast literature[14,15] on how to teach human medical ethics: Indeed, vets have tended to follow human medics in using the 'case method'[14] or 'problem-based learning',[15] as a way to structure discussion.

Existing research confirms the merit of using intensive, small group teaching formats (as well as lectures) for veterinary ethics teaching.[9,16] When cases or vignettes are used,[17] these are usually provided by the educator.[18] Research also shows that the student educational experience is shaped by the wider institutional or professional context (see ref. 19 on the hidden curriculum). Furthermore, studies have started to recognise that creativity matters in developing graduates who are fit for practice,[20,21] and that elements of competition can be useful in welfare teaching.[22]

This short communication introduces two potential teaching innovations. The first is formal and compulsory, and adopts the case-based approach. The other is informal and voluntary, and gives students an opportunity to demonstrate creativity and reflection. What unites both is the pedagogical rationale[23] that

1. Very briefly describe the event/critical incident/case that you have witnessed.
2. Identify TWO courses of action for you as the veterinary surgeon.
3. Justify EACH course of action by reference to;
   a) Any relevant laws or codes of practice and
   b) Your professional responsibilities as a vet and
   c) Some of the 5 ethical theories you have been taught in previous years
4. Decide on which course of action is most justified and why (this may or may not be what you or others actually did at the time).
5. Reflect on what you have learnt from this example;
   a) What are your feelings now about the event/incident/case?
   b) Are there wider implications for your rotations or future career?
   c) Have you learnt anything about yourself or others through the actual event or through discussion of this event today?

FIGURE 1 Ethics session framework

self-reflection and sharing personal experiences can be a useful route to student learning.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Student-led ethics case analysis

In 2010, the University of Nottingham introduced a new 4 hours small group ethics session for year 5 students. Each compulsory session involved about eight students and was facilitated by a faculty member who was, or received training from, an ethics specialist. In 2013, this session was revised to only discuss examples *chosen by the students*. Students each volunteered a personal example of an ethical dilemma. This dilemma may have occurred before University when doing work experience, relate to their experiences on campus, on placement, or with their own animals.

Part 1 of the session involved a brief facilitator introduction, including outlining the Chatham House Rules (whereby students agree not to name 'who said what' outside of the session in order to create a safe space). The students were then split into two teams of about four. Each team shared their dilemmas with each other and chose one to work up into a full case. Part 2 involved each team working through the session plan (summarised in Figure 1). Part 3 consisted of each team presenting their case analysis to the whole group. Part 4 was led by the facilitator who wrapped-up the session, providing some feedback. Timings of each phase were variable, allowing the facilitator to be very responsive to the flow of the discussion.

Whilst students have formal routes to feedback on the whole rotation within which this session sits, we deliberately utilised a more informal route of asking students to write down anonymous feedback on post-it notes, including aspects they found useful or less useful, at the end of the session.

2.2 | Student reflection through creative writing

In 2015, the first author established an annual creative writing competition based on examples published by human medics in *Journal of American Medical Association* and elsewhere.[24–26] Open to all Nottingham veterinary students (preliminary year to year 5), students were invited to write a story in exactly 55 words on an ethics-related theme (i.e. 'responsibility' in 2016, 'dilemma' in 2017 and 'emotion' in 2018). Students were not given training in creative writing and were only given brief guidance – that stories could be dramatic or mundane, and that writing represents a chance to show reflexivity. All entries were prominently displayed in the School foyer during an annual campus wide art day, open to all staff and students. The competition was judged by the first author, a clinical faculty member, and an expert in creative writing from the University's School of English. The prize, donated by the School, was £55. Participation was entirely voluntary and was not linked to a particular module; we did not seek feedback from those who participated.

3 | RESULTS

Staff reported extremely high levels of student engagement with the ethics session, particularly in terms of applying ethical theory to real life examples that matter to them, and the perception of listening to others' viewpoints. A wide range of key topics were considered, for example related to euthanasia, and communication with clients and colleagues. Informal student feedback collected after each session was almost universally positive. Examples of comments included '*I enjoyed talking about our own experiences and having a debate as it highlights there is never a right/wrong answer*'; '*This has made me consider the bigger overall picture, and has improved my self-reflection skills*'; and '*Would have been nice to perhaps have time to go through everyone's "ethical dilemma"…but understand this would make for quite a long session*!'

The short story competition did not attract significant numbers of entries (between 5 and 10 annually). However, publicly displaying all entries did generate discussion amongst the wider student body. By way of including the 'results' or outputs of this initiative, Figure 2 shows the winning competition entries.

Fetch!

Do you risk humiliation and ask for a detailed description of the item? Do you ask for the precise location amongst an array of densely stocked products? Unfortunately not. You reply confidently that you can return promptly, then proceed to frantically search the entire practice, knowing your reputation as a vet student is at stake (Fiona Tomczynska, 2016).

Crisis in the Cowshed

Martha pushed her hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand, leaving a smear of blood and excrement across her brow as she did so. The cow groaned beside her. It needed shooting but the farmer wouldn't agree to it. Her first day really wasn't going as well as she had hoped (Mia Ball, 2017).

Pig placement

Her leg dragged behind her. A sense of responsibility clung to the air. The farmer's hands steadied. Bang. The sound reverberates. Her eyes flood with panic, squealing. It wasn't enough, blood pouring. Bang. This time silence, a thump as she hits the floor. A quiet settles around the room. A bittersweet moment, peace in obliteration (Jordanne Came, 2018).

FIGURE 2   Short story prize winning entries

4 | DISCUSSION

A previous study has argued that veterinary students may find it 'safer' to analyse others' decisions using pre-existing vignettes.[17] However, our experience with the student-led ethics session was that participants did not struggle with discussing their own examples. Indeed, informal student feedback confirms that they found it to be an engaging format. As with all formats, there are limitations: Significant academic staff time is required, given the small class sizes. Another disadvantage is that whilst all students bring a dilemma to discuss, not all are worked up, although students are encouraged to follow the process again after the session. Overall, we contend that focusing explicitly on students' own experiences represents an additional gain in developing professional self-identity[23] and skills of reflective practice, another RCVS day one competency.[27] Student-led ethics case analysis is now fully embedded in the University of Nottingham year 5 curriculum. Going forward, further research could be designed to compare the quality of vet student engagement using this format with more traditional structures, although education scholars disagree on how best to measure student engagement.[28]

The use of creative writing in a Veterinary School may first appear to represent quite an 'alternative' technique. However, the entries included above suggest it can generate some powerful examples of ethical reflection: The first highlights the way that stress can be caused by apparently mundane issues (finding the right medicine or equipment), and that this matters to professionalism; the second reflects on the gap between student expectation and clinical practice; the third considers the dramatic, visceral aspects of euthanasia. As argued by Christianson in relation to human medicine,[29] 'The practice of medicine can be emotionally draining, and I use my 55-word stories as an outlet'. More follow-up research would be useful to track whether and how such formats could have an impact in the veterinary context, and, specifically, whether the use of creative methods could help vets cope with the 'moral stress' they experience.[10] At the University of Nottingham, staff research leave meant that the competition was paused in 2019/2020. In terms of future development, an option being considered is to remove the competition element, but embed this creative writing activity into a self-directed learning session.

Whilst the veterinary curriculum is under constant pressure to add in more elements,[30] veterinary schools have a duty to nurture a culture that encourages vet students to 'speak up'. Crucially, if vets are not confident about speaking up in practice, this can lead to a failure of care for animals, poor animal welfare outcomes[7] and poor job satisfaction.[1] If allowing students to 'tell their own stories' encourages ethical awareness and self-reflection, wider experiment with these techniques in the UK and beyond could potentially impact on the daily lives of future veterinary surgeons.

Dedicated mechanisms also need to be created for vets once in practice to provide time and space for ethical reflection.[31] This is echoed in the Vet Futures and the Animal Welfare Strategy, which identify that vets and vet nurses want support in this area; indeed, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) is now offering Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in practical ethical decision-making.[32] However, further research is needed to confirm how best to do this, and whether the techniques of participant-led ethics case analysis, or even creative writing, could be successfully adapted for a clinical setting. This work is only likely to become more crucial, as public interest in animal welfare and ethics intensifies.[33]

ORCID

Pru Hobson-West https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6105-0747
Kate Millar https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7155-7776

REFERENCES

1. Mossop L. Novice to expert? Teaching and development of moral reasoning skills. Vet Rec. 2015;177(5):122-3.
2. Batchelor CEM, McKeegan DEF. Survey of the frequency and perceived stressfulness of ethical dilemmas encountered in UK veterinary practice. Vet Rec. 2012;170(1):19.
3. Grimm H, Bergadano A, Musk GC, Otto K, Taylor PM, Duncan JC. Drawing the line in clinical treatment of companion animals: recommendations from an ethics working party. Vet Rec. 2018;182(23):664.
4. Hobson-West P, Jutel A. Animals, veterinarians and the sociology of diagnosis. Sociol Health Illn. 2019;42(2):393-406.
5. Batchelor CEM, Creed A, McKeegan DEF. A preliminary investigation into the moral reasoning abilities of UK veterinarians. Vet Rec. 2015;177(5):124.
6. Kipperman B, Morris P, Rollin B. Ethical dilemmas encountered by small animal veterinarians: characterisation, responses, consequences and beliefs regarding euthanasia. Vet Rec. 2018;182(19):548.
7. Hernandez E, Fawcett A, Brouwer E, Rau J, Turner PV. Speaking up: veterinary ethical responsibilities and animal welfare issues in everyday practice. Animals. 2018;8(1):15.
8. Verrinder JM, Phillips CJC. Development of a moral judgment measure for veterinary education. J Vet Med Educ. 2014;41(3):258-64.
9. Kipperman B, Rollin B, Martin J. Veterinary student opinions regarding ethical dilemmas encountered by veterinarians and the benefits of ethics Instruction. J Vet Med Educ. 2020:e20190059.
10. Cobb KA, Brown GA, Hammond RH, Mossop LH. Alumni-based evaluation of a novel veterinary curriculum: are Nottingham graduates prepared for clinical practice? Veterinary Record Open. 2015;2(2):e000116.
11. Magalhaes-Sant'Ana M. A theoretical framework for human and veterinary medical ethics education. Adv Health Sci Educ. 2016;21(5):1123-36.
12. Gray C. Similar but not the same: the teaching of veterinary and medical ethics. Vet Rec. 2014;175(23):590-1.
13. Magalhães-Sant'Ana M, Lassen J, Millar KM, Sandøe P, Olsson IAS. Examining why ethics is taught to veterinary students: a qualitative study of veterinary educators' perspectives. J Vet Med Educ. 2014;41(4):350-7.
14. Fox E, Arnold RM, Brody B. Medical ethics education: past, present, and future. Acad Med. 1995;70(9):761-9.
15. Parker M. Autonomy, problem-based learning, and the teaching of medical ethics. J Med Ethics. 1995;21(5):305-10.
16. Verrinder JM, Phillips CJC. Assessing veterinary and animal science students' moral judgment development on animal ethics issues. J Vet Med Educ. 2015;42(3):206-16.
17. Magalhães-Sant'Ana M, Hanlon AJ. Straight from the horse's mouth: using vignettes to support student learning in veterinary ethics. J Vet Med Educ. 2016;43(3):321-30.
18. Abood SK, Siegford JM. Student perceptions of an animal-welfare and ethics course taught early in the veterinary curriculum. J Vet Med Educ. 2012;39(2):136-41.
19. Hafferty FW, Franks R. The hidden curriculum, ethics teaching, and the structure of medical education. Acad Med. 1994;69(11):861-71.
20. Langebaek R, Tanggaard L, Toft N, Berendt M. Using creativity as an educational tool in veterinary surgery: students' perceptions and surgical performance. J Vet Med Educ. 2020;47(1):91-9.
21. Milota MM, van Thiel G, van Delden JJM. Narrative medicine as a medical education tool: a systematic review. Med Teach. 2019;41(7):802-10.
22. Shivley CB, Garry FB, Grandin T. Teaching tip: teaching animal welfare through competitive judging contests. J Vet Med Educ. 2017;44(2):223-8.
23. Branch WT Jr., George M. Reflection-based learning for professional ethical formation. AMA J Ethics. 2017;19(4):349-56.
24. Scheetz AF, Fry ME. A piece of my mind: the stories. J Am Med Assoc. 2000;283(15):1934.
25. Girone JAC. Little stories. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2004;158(1):91.
26. Fogarty CT. Fifty-five word stories: "small jewels" for personal reflection and teaching. Fam Med. 2010;42(6):400-2.
27. Mossop LH, Senior A. I'll show you mine if you show me yours! Portfolio design in two UK Veterinary Schools. J Vet Med Educ. 2008;35(4):599-606.
28. Bowden JL-H, Tickle L, Naumann K. The four pillars of tertiary student engagement and success: a holistic measurement approach. Stud Higher Educ. 2019:1-18.
29. Christianson AL. Years of stories. JAMA. 2009;302(10):1042.
30. Main DCJ. Evolution of animal-welfare education for veterinary students. J Vet Med Educ. 2010;37(1):30-5.
31. Millar K. Let's talk about veterinary ethics: developing tools, finding spaces and recognising institutional responsibilities. Vet Rec. 2018;182(23):662-3.
32. Wensley S. BVA offers support in practice veterinary ethics. Vet Rec. 2017;181(9):245.
33. Freire R, Phillips CJC, Verrinder JM, Collins T, Degeling C, Fawcett A, et al. The importance of animal welfare science and ethics to veterinary students in Australia and New Zealand. J Vet Med Educ. 2017;44(2):208-16.