



SVME Newsletter

Newsletter of the Society
for Veterinary Medical
Ethics

Spring 2012

President's Message Spring 2012



Alice Villalobos, DVM, DPNAP
with Neo, her Olde English Bulldog

Dear SVME,

Congratulations to Michael J. White from Kansas State for winning the **SVME Student Essay Contest** sponsored by **WALTHAM**. Michael's essay is published in this issue. He will receive \$1,000 and travel expenses to present a special slide show featuring the main points of his essay at 3:00 pm during the Ethics Plenary Sessions on Monday, August 6th during the AVMA Convention in San Diego.

Last year, Dr. Rebecca Mount inquired if SVME had any guidelines to conduct clinical trials and other types of biomedical research in private practices. Dr. Mount was looking for guidelines with respect to animal welfare for shelter animals that may be adopted. Rebecca identified a need for private practice research guidelines.

The BOD organized a Document Development Committee (DDC) chaired by Dr. Dennis Lawler with volunteer help from: Sylvie Cloutier, Peggy Dannaman, Lide Doffermyre, Marty Greer, Rebecca Mount, Patricia Olson, Laura Riggs and Lee Shapiro. This excellent team developed the first SVME document, **Guidelines for Clinical Trials and Research in Private Practice**, which is published in this issue and will appear in the SVME CE course. It will help veterinarians in private practice consider ethical aspects of conducting clinical trials on client owned companion animals.

Articles and By-Laws: Drs. Suann Hosie, myself and Dr. Marty Greer (who is also an attorney) have been working on the

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official wording changes to the SVME Articles and By-Laws. These changes will be circulated to the membership in July via email. Then submitted for approval at the Annual General Membership Meeting which will take place directly following the Ethics Plenary Sessions on August 6, 2012 during the AVMA Convention. The proposed changes include:

- a. extend terms of office for SVME Officers and BOD Members for two years instead of one year
- b. remove or modify the office of SVME Historian
- c. exempt the obligation of the President Elect for planning the ethics program for AVMA.
- d. transfer the responsibility for planning AVMA ethics programs to the SVME Speaker Coordinator for AVMA or a Committee, since AVMA requires programs far in advance.
- e. minor grammatical, punctuation and capitalization changes

The VETETHICS Listserv is the main pipeline for the SVME to discuss ethical issues. We thank Sylvie Cloutie and Dennis Lawler who serve as moderators. The rules of etiquette for the VETETHICS Listserv consist of courtesy and professionalism while discussing opposing viewpoints. Our moderators are determined to keep VETHETHICS Listserv a safe forum for enlightened discussion despite topics which generate inherently polarized opinions.

The SVME CE Course will focus on medical ethics rather than compliance with federal, state and local laws. The CE Committee decided to dedicate all six modules to honor our former CE committee chairman, Dr. John McCarthy. John spearheaded this body of work until he became ill last fall. Dr. Diane Leviton, ACVIM, is the new chair. The SVME CE course will be posted on the SVME web site for enrollment in 2013. Five of the six modules are completed. Lee Shapiro, Ph.D, Patricia Olsen, DVM, Ph.D. and yours truly will author the 6th module which will deal with animal welfare ethics. The CE Committee will recruit 20 SVME members to take the initial CE course and provide feedback.



Leticia Gonzales, class of 2013 at CSU, with her mentor, Dr. Alice Villalobos

The SVME Nomination Committee is seeking members who are interested in being nominated for the SVME Board of Directors, holding office, volunteering for committees. The BOD approved of organizing a special **Promotion Committee** to promote the work and purpose of the SVME to all those in the veterinary medical field, without affiliation with any organization. If you have experience in marketing and promotion, please contact me at dralicev@aol.com.



Shomer Award: Leland Shapiro, Ph.D. nominated Temple Grandin, Ph.D. who was unanimously selected as the 2012 Shomer Ethics Award recipient.

White Paper vs. Consensus Statement? The BOD concluded that from time to time, the SVME may release white papers which may discuss viewpoints without consensus on controversial topics relevant to the field of veterinary medical ethics and bioethics.

As you can see, the SVME is energetically moving forward with adaptations and changes! Please try to be with us in San Diego on August 6th. Enjoy your summer!

Luv-in-pets,

Alice

SVME Board of Directors:

Erik Cleary (Chair, Student Essay Contest)

Sylvie Cloutie (Listserve Moderator)

Lide Doffermyre (Secretary)

Louise Dunn

Annie Forslund

Marty Greer

Suann Hosie (Parliamentarian, Historian)

Wendy Koch

Diane Levitan (Chair, CE Course)

Dennis Lawler (Chair, Document Development and Listserve CoModerator)

Leland Shapiro

John Wright (Treasurer)

Alice Villalobos (President).

The 2012 SVME Student Essay Contest

SVME Essay Committee: Erik Clary (chair), Peggy Danneman, Lide Doffermyre, Suann Hosie, Dennis Lawler, Lee Shapiro, Alice Villalobos. We thank Waltham for their generous sponsorship and cash award for the winner.

Topic: "On the Question of 'Human Exceptionalism' and Its Bearing upon Veterinary Medical Ethics"

Topic Description: " In recent decades, there has been much discussion within veterinary circles and the broader society over the moral treatment of animals. At the heart of the debate lies the question of what some have labeled as "human exceptionalism" - the claim that there exists some fundamental difference between human beings and animals that serves to justify differing standards of ethical treatment. In this essay, the student will first evaluate the claim of human exceptionalism and then discuss its ramifications for veterinary medical ethics. Complete instructions and essay evaluative criteria are posted on the SVME website (<http://www.svme.org>). Send completed essay via email attachment (Microsoft Word or Adobe 'pdf' document) to Dr. Erik M. Clary, Chair of SVME Student Essay Committee at svmestudentessay@gmail.com. Deadline for submission is Saturday, April 14, 2012."

88 essays were received by the deadline. This represents a significant increase over previous years' contests (Gary Block reports an historic average of 40-45 entries during his tenure on the committee).

Each essay was assigned a random number, stripped of the title page and saved as a pdf file identified only by the random number.

Three rounds of review were employed (note: the particular position taken in the essay on the question of human exceptionalism was NOT a factor for consideration at any level of review):

1st round review (chairman of committee): essays were reviewed, yielding 30 essays for 2nd round review. Among those 30 essays, 7 institutions were represented (Iowa State, Kansas State, PIMA Medical Institute, Penn Foster, Tufts, Univ Minnesota, Virginia Tech)

2nd round review (committee minus the chairman): the 30 essays were ordered according to essay length and then stratified across six groups, for a total of 5 essays per group. The 6 other committee members were each assigned a group of essays to review/rank according to the published criteria; all essays receiving in their group either a first place or second place mark advanced to the third (final) round, for a total of 12 finalist essays. Among those 12 essays, 5 institutions were represented.

Congratulations go to Michael J. White of Kansas State for his winning essay which follows:

Anthropocentrism and Its Bearing on Veterinary Medicine

Submitted 14 April 2012

Written by Michael J. White

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Introduction

The concept of human exceptionalism is one that spans a wide spectrum of disciplines and is debated on a growing number of battle grounds – from philosophy and law to scientific research and the agricultural trade. In recent years, the role of anthropocentrism in our daily existence has been more formally debated as our societal perception and understanding of animals (including their behavior and intellectual capacity) have changed. As the relationship between humans and animals “has evolved, the public has become more sensitive to the needs of animals, and this sensitivity has been reflected in increased legislative activity on animal law issues in both the United States and Europe.”⁶ Clearly, the significance of this debate is far reaching. As the highly educated liaisons between the human and animal world, veterinarians warrant a central role in these discussions. Rather than recoil from a potentially polarizing discussion, we must embrace this position and offer an enlightened and unbiased perspective on anthropocentrism and its sociopolitical implications. As a profession that has “itself stressed the immeasurable value of the human animal bond,”⁸ we have a responsibility to our patients, their owners, and to society as a whole. Aside from acknowledging the intrinsic importance of providing experienced insight, veterinarians should embrace the opportunity to reshape and solidify our role in the ever-evolving world of human and animal relations.

Perceptions of Anthropocentrism: Past and Present

Anthropocentrism is a principal branch of the more general ideology entitled “speciesism.” Coined by Richard Ryder in the 1970s, speciesism is “the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species.”⁵ Because as humans we typically associate beings as either human or nonhuman, the term “human exceptionalism” has been adopted to specifically identify the alleged superiority of humans over our animal counterparts. Long before the dogma was given a formal name, however, our society had adopted an anthropocentric model for our interaction with animals; they were subordinate creatures and existed merely to provide us with certain services. To put it simply, animals represented a direct food source, access to labor, or companionship. Animal ownership is a tradition that has persisted for thousands of years; “the rights that humans have over nonhumans have been well established for centuries and have reflected society’s long-term relationship with animals.”⁶

The roots of this philosophy can be either primal or religious. Exposed to the elements of a harsh and unforgiving landscape, Early Man pursued any means necessary to survive. Naturally, they used all resources available to prolong life; the targeting of animals as a vital nutrition source was critical to our survival as a species. Not only was this our proclivity, it was also our birthright. Verse 1:26 of the Book of Genesis tells us that “God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing

that creepeth upon the earth.” Though the ambiguity of scripture is often debated, here the message seems clear: there are humans who have dominion, and then there is everything else.

Of course, not everyone accepts Biblical word as the foundation for their actions. For these proponents of human exceptionalism, our species’ intrinsic superiority is based on intangible mental capacities. “Ascribing rights exclusively to humans was historically done on the basis of several criteria, such as sentience, a sense of the self, rationality, and the capacity for language.”¹ Our ability to reason, to communicate, and to empathize are traits that make us inherently human and differentiate us from “lower” species. Other psychological features might include maturity, refinement, civility and morality.²

The Rise of Animal Welfare and the Question of “Equality”

As our understanding of animal intelligence and their capacity for thought has developed, however, this reason-based argument for anthropocentrism has been challenged. Siobhán Baggot explains the fact “that these criteria are limited only to humans is contentious with our present knowledge of the capacity for some nonhuman animals to have some of these traits.”¹ Specifically, “research with a wide range of nonhuman animals has demonstrated behaviors and traits once thought to be the exclusive domain of humans, including cooperation, altruism, empathy, and a sense of fairness.”⁷ Dissenters argue that if the basis for our human exceptionalist doctrine is rooted in unique mental faculties, but these traits are not actually exclusive to our species, the concept of anthropocentrism is inherently fallacious.

Moreover, some advocates of animal rights highlight the fact that “some humans, such as those in irreversible comas, those with severe mental retardation, and infants, may not possess sentience, speech, self-awareness, or rationality, yet these people are widely acknowledged to be deserving of, and are granted, rights.”¹ This is a compelling argument. Though the groups of humans outlined above do not possess some of the mental faculties that constitute our unique humanity per an anthropocentric dogma, we still consider them human. In fact, we deliberately protect their humanity and preserve their life *because* they lack the ability to reason for themselves. It is interesting to apply this concept to animals that similarly may lack the capacity for complex thought. Tom Regan, a fervent advocate for animal rights, stated that since “animals themselves cannot speak out on their own behalf, that they cannot organize, petition, march, exert political pressure or raise our level of consciousness—all this does not weaken our obligation to act on their behalf—if anything their impotence makes our obligation the stronger.”¹ Regan espouses a methodology in which certain rights are owed to various species based on inherent value. Why do we include humans in prolonged comas and those with severe learning disabilities in our anthropocentric doctrine? The reason is because we understand that even absent the capacity for in-depth thought, these individuals possess inherent value as living organisms. Acknowledging

that some animal species exhibit complex psychological features such as reasoning and language, while some humans actually lack these abilities, Regan considers how we can deny animals the rights that we protect for impaired humans.



The argument rooted in “inherent value,” however, can be difficult to formally defend because its foundation is rooted in subjectivity. Richard Ryder, the man who gave speciesism its name, explains that intrinsic “value cannot exist in the absence of consciousness or potential consciousness. Thus, rocks and rivers and houses have no interests and no rights of their own. This does not mean, of course, that they are not of value to us, and to many other painients [*sic*], including those who need

them as habitats and who would suffer without them.”⁹ Instead, Ryder argues that the only way to objectively compare distinct species is to consider their ability to feel pain.

At first glance, the strategy of analyzing pain threshold to determine inherent value seems bleak. Why not accentuate the positive and consider each species’ pursuit of happiness as evidence of human qualities? The reason is because the pursuit of happiness is species- (even individual-) independent, while pain is universal. Ryder acknowledges that “each species is different in its needs and in its reactions. What is painful for some is not necessarily so for others. So we can treat different species differently, but we should always treat equal suffering equally.”⁹ This “panient” doctrine can be applied to any “pain-feeling-being regardless of his or her sex, class, race, religion, nationality or species.”⁹

Furthermore, advocates of the panient doctrine point out that “since Darwin we have known we are human animals related to all the other animals through evolution.”⁹ As such, it is possible that these “lower” species may be only a few million years of evolution from acquiring our more developed mental capacities. In this light, animal rights advocates argue that speciesism is no different than racism or sexism – prejudices that are based solely on morally irrelevant physical characteristics. In the developed world, we have endeavored to remove these biases from our sociopolitical existence. To do the same to speciesism seems like a natural next step. After all, “rights are granted not because all individuals are equal, but rather, rights protect those who may suffer oppression from those in power.”¹ Regardless of our individual opinion of animal sentience, it is our duty as a “higher” species to protect those who cannot defend themselves.



However, proponents of this ideology are quick to point out that “different treatment and disadvantageous treatment are not the same thing. Being equally considered does not entail being treated in the same way. It implies being treated in a way that is not disadvantageous for anyone involved. Hence, if different individuals have different interests, considering them equal will mean treating each one of them in accordance to the interests they have.”⁵ This is an important distinction when animal rights advocates decry the use of speciesist maxims within our society.

While pain may be universal, defining the essential needs of any species (or individual therein) is entirely unique. Therefore, “a belief in certain rights for animals does not necessarily imply the right to life or that animals are equal to humans in importance.”¹ The biggest criticism of animal rights doctrine (and changes in our legal system that reflect these beliefs) is that it will place animals on the same level as humans, granting them the same rights as their handlers. While some extreme activists may espouse this ideology, most pragmatists acknowledge that there is an inherent difference between humans and animals – not in their ability to undertake complex thought or in their inherent value per se, but in their essential physical and emotional needs. Equality does not imply sameness. Ultimately, this is the critical point that must be highlighted when considering the place of animals in each family unit, within society, and (perhaps most importantly to us as veterinarians) as subjects of our legal system.

The Relationship Between Humans and Animals: Society and Law

Regardless of each person’s opinion of human exceptionalism, one undeniable fact remains clear: the sociopolitical conceptions of pet ownership and animal rights are in a state of flux. Clearly, “society’s growing compassion for animals and the almost universal embracement of the human–animal bond have led to a greater sensitivity towards the needs of animals and changes in how the law protects animals.”⁶ As testament to this



fact, animal law is one of the fastest growing courses of study at our nations universities. “As recently as 2000, only a handful of law schools in the United States offered courses in animal law. Now roughly 120 do. These include several of the nation’s premier law schools, including Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia, which have established endowed programs in animal law.”⁷ In a world where “corporations, ships, municipalities, and other nonsentient entities are legal persons, [...] some would like to see an augmented legal status closer to personhood for animals [and] numerous legal scholars are seeking ways to raise animals above simple property.”⁸

Most troubling to some individuals is that these changes are not restricted to pet ownership, but also penetrate the agricultural industry. Books like *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and movies like *Food, Inc.* “have increased public concern about how animals are raised and slaughtered for food,” and a rapidly growing number of people are adopting vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.⁷ Recognizing that a percentage of these dietary modifications may be motivated by health-conscious sentiments and not reflect animal rights ideologies, the underlying trend is indicative of changing societal perceptions. The passage of laws such as Proposition 9 in California, and the change from “owner” to “guardian” in Rhode Island, underscore these changes.^{2,8} Still, “according to animal law scholars and practitioners, the law has not kept up with science and society.”⁷

Even in the field of ethics and psychology, an increasing number of papers are being published that explore “the effect of categorization as food on the perceived moral standing of animals”³ and “conceptions of human uniqueness among vegetarians and omnivores.”² At their heart, these studies investigate human exceptionalism and its bearing on the choices we make as pet owners and morally-conscious consumers. Far from being ethereal psychological explorations, the findings of these studies can be applied to numerous fields. They reflect the “ongoing debate in philosophy [of] whether animals should be included in the scope of the principles of justice.”² Considering the question at hand, researchers have demonstrated that the “moral disengagement of meat-eaters might substantially reduce the anthropomorphic perceptions of animals, [...] while] people who refuse meat consumption by becoming vegetarians or vegans are more eager to include animals into their broad scope of justice and seize to deny animals crucial psychological characteristics.”² This process of dehumanization is central to the question of human exceptionalism, how animals are perceived within our society, and our responsibilities as veterinarians.

Potential Impacts on Veterinary Medicine

Clearly, the landscape of veterinary medicine is changing. Acknowledging this inevitable reality, the worst thing that veterinarians can do is nothing. As advocates for both animals and their owners, we have an obligation to offer our unique insight. How, then, must we proceed?

First, we need to recognize the shifting climate within our society and adopt a proactive approach to addressing these issues. But, as Charlotte Lacroix notes, “this awareness by no means justifies a blanket change in the laws that govern the relationship between humans and nonhumans.”⁶ Although the change in terminology from “owner” to “guardian” may seem innocuous at face value, its implications are more widespread and reflect monumental changes in our legal system.

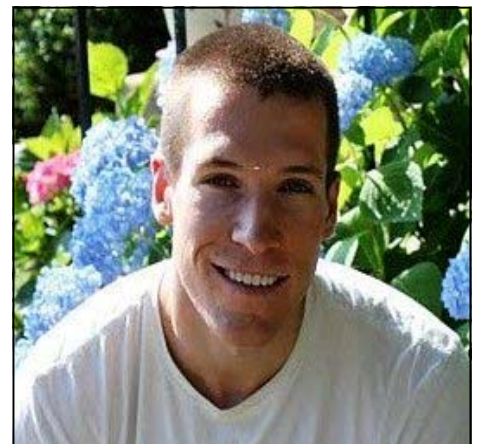
Though some may argue that it “is only a semantic change with no legal significance. Such a statement is disturbing and wrong, because those familiar with legal arguments know full well that there is no such thing as ‘only semantics’ under the law. Lawyers routinely argue before judges about what was or was not meant by simple words.”⁶ As such, to allow this change to become institutionalized without properly educating the public would be ill-advised.

The laws that govern guardianship, in particular, are well established. Implementing this change formally would shift the emphasis from the pet owner to the pet itself. Theoretically, the needs of the ward (or animal) could

supplant the needs of the guardian. To legally force an owner to subordinate their own interests in favor of a pet would introduce a bleak reality and drastically change the way that veterinarians conduct business. In this way, “the issues of whether pets should be treated as ‘children’ under the law and whether noneconomic damages should be awarded for negligent acts are challenging veterinarians’ ability to conduct their practices as usual and the ethical paradigm to which they have grown accustomed.”⁶

In the medical world, the veterinarian is an altogether different breed; animal doctors have always differed from their counterparts in human medicine. Since the use of animal medicine is so often considered an elective service, veterinarians cannot always utilize the full spectrum of tests at their disposal. Rather, an animal doctor must weigh the financial limitations of their clients against the benefits of a given procedure. They must be methodical in designing a plan of care and deliberate in their actions when undertaken. As a corollary to this reality, the veterinarian not only functions as a clinician, but also must assume the role of business person, dentist, psychiatrist, and even undertaker. While this is not an easy (and perhaps not an enviable) job, I have always embraced the challenge and immense satisfaction of being all of these things for one patient and client. It is at once the profession’s most difficult and most appealing trait. To be able to advocate on behalf of a selfless and silent animal (and to do so in such a comprehensive manner) is singular among occupations and was the most inspiring to me as a burgeoning veterinarian. Proposed changes that seek to elevate animals to human status in the eyes of the law challenge this singularity of the veterinary profession.

The importance of this distinction extends beyond companion animal veterinary medicine – lab animal-based science forms the foundation of medical advancements, and our agricultural industry feeds people across the world. Fortunately, the desire to protect the livelihood of these animals is synergistic with our human needs. “Good science requires humane treatment, so that there is both an ethical and a scientific reason for improving the treatment of laboratory animals.”⁴ To this end, “there is no excuse for institutions that house animal research — including most research universities — not to have vigorous and well-defined programmes [*sic*] to explain what goes on within their walls. Institutions should publicize the high standards that they are required to meet before they can use animals. They should also discuss their strategies to replace animals with more sophisticated research tools, refine research practice and reduce the overall number of animals used.”⁸ Taking these steps will ensure that the respect and care of animals within our society becomes a priority, without sacrificing the myriad benefits from animal use that our society relies on every day.



Conclusions

Recognizing their import to owners and members of the public, alike, veterinarians should not deftly neglect the rising interest in animal rights and simply write them off as superfluous. Some change is inevitable. For this reason, we must “become involved with pet owners and work to assure that such legal change does not put veterinary medicine out of business by saddling it with enormous insurance costs of the sort that have plagued human medicine.”⁸ We are very fortunate that “as veterinarians, we are privileged in that we can actually do much good for those creatures that we count on as friends and as providers of food, fiber, and pleasure, as well as for those that give their lives for science.”¹ But, respect and appreciation does not imply equality, and we must remember that there is a significant difference between a human and an animal. To forget this distinction would greatly undermine our role as veterinarians in society and challenge the many wonderful characteristics that make our profession so unique.

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See references next page

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Commentary: DF Lawler DVM**How Can We Retire Dr. Status Quo?**

“Change before you have to” (Jack Welch)

What causes reluctance to change? While the fundamental answer may be well beyond the purpose of this commentary, it seems reasonable to consider many aspects of human nature that are familiar to all of us. But, is human nature the only impediment? Where is the line between group behaviors and cronyism? Where is the line between leadership and elitism? What are the ethical implications in health professions when the lines between positive and negative behaviors are crossed?

We do not need to point specific fingers; there are plenty of examples, and perhaps some surprising culprits.

We might start broadly with a veterinary educational system that appears increasingly misaligned with societal needs. Are veterinary educational and administrative systems at status quo? Given the overwhelming amount of evidence and emotion that seems requisite to stimulate even exploratory discussions about overhaul, it would seem so.

How many small animal practitioners and practices are needed? How many are graduating each year? How many production animal veterinarians, public health veterinarians, and research veterinarians, are needed? How many are graduating each year? How What is the veterinary quality of life? These problems



were predicted 30 years ago.

We hear about new veterinary colleges and new specialty boards (I ask, “to what end?”). Many new graduates face huge educational debt and wonder what to do.

Certain segments of the profession are undersupplied. We see this undersupply problem used as a reason to graduate yet more and more.....small animal practitioners. This whole system is maintained at status quo, even as it begins to decline, bywhom? *All of us*

Perhaps we can think about some clinical practice paradigms; everything from diagnostics (such as genetic screening for breeding health across species) to preventive health care (such as the vaccine controversy). Do we take the time to critically evaluate relevant experimental designs in published veterinary literature, to judge for ourselves whether research is being done adequately? Do we take the time to evaluate health care progress on population bases? Or, do we just accept convention because veterinary hierarchies say that all is well, often through inactivity? And this whole system is maintained at status quo by.....whom? *All of us.*

A common response within the profession is something akin to “What can we do? It is the old boy network all over again. They will only change when the whole thing is dust in their hands, and maybe not even then.” And, of course, nothing changes. And this whole system within the profession, maybe even with a bit of entrenched cronyism, is maintained at status quo by.....whom? *All of us*

Can we identify the primary impediment to progress? It occurs to me that it might be Dr. Status Quo. Well, perhaps it is time for Dr. Quo to retire.

There are broader ethical aspects surrounding many veterinary controversies that challenge all of us, relative to the profession’s response to societal issues and needs. How can we effect change, while maintaining our primary obligation to animal health and welfare?

Here are a few suggestions:

1. Each State form task forces to evaluate these issues from within the communities of veterinarians that have direct contact with those questions.
2. Establish forums at State Veterinary Association Annual Meetings to present conclusions and recommendations from local task forces.
3. Establish similar forums at Annual National Meetings, to discuss *and* determine optimal changes, as proposed by veterinarians working at the community level, whatever their discipline may be.

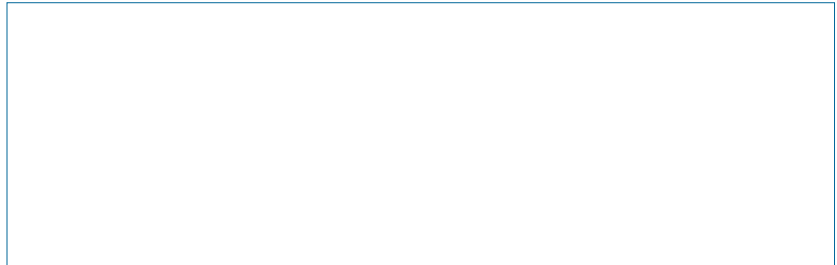
Possibly, these are means by which we can retire Dr. Quo and move sensibly forward. What is “sensibly” forward? That is for all of us to decide.

So, can we say “happy retirement” to Dr. Status Quo? More importantly, are we willing to do the work that will be needed to retire the old devil? ►



Toshiba

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SVME Mission Statement

The Society for Veterinary Medical Ethics was founded in 1994 by a group of veterinarians, biomedical researchers and academics to promote discussion and debate about ethical issues arising in and relevant to veterinary practice. The SVME publishes a newsletter, provides a listserv, holds an annual meeting at the AVMA convention, sponsors an annual student essay contest and honors an individual annually with the Shomer Award for outstanding contributions to veterinary medical ethics.

Individuals interested in information or in joining the SVME can visit the SVME website below to learn more about the organization.

www.svme.org/

