

**An open letter to veterinary students: What would a community care model look like?**

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Dear Veterinary Students,

You have chosen the most noble of professions- you have taken an oath to labour for the benefit of society and for those that are voiceless. You promised to "...promote animal health and welfare, prevent and relieve animal suffering, [and] protect the health of the public and the environment..." (AVMA 2008). Yet how does one accomplish this promise in the traditional veterinary path of working in a private for-profit clinic that essentially only serves the wealthy (Harding 2018). As the heartbreaking statistics show us that more than a quarter of you, as Canadian veterinarians, have considered taking your own life (compared to about 6% of the general population; Perret et al. 2020), this traditional way of doing veterinary medicine is not acceptable. I want to offer you some thoughts on an alternative that is likely to be more aligned with your values and your ultimate reasons for pursuing veterinary medicine: a community care model.

I am not a veterinarian. I am an animal welfare scientist and teacher whose focus is on companion animal sheltering. As such, I have very little knowledge of the veterinary systems other than what I see as an outsider. But I hope that what I have learned working within companion animal welfare can also be useful for you.

For too long, veterinary medicine has been built on some philosophical assumptions, that I now know to be faulty in my own discipline of animal sheltering and even quite likely to lead to rather terrible societal outcomes. There are likely many more assumptions that we can brainstorm, but I think I will focus on the following two to show the problems with the status quo.

***Assumption #1: Owners who cannot afford veterinary care are irresponsible.***

We have all heard the statement that owning pets is a "luxury, not a right", justifying high animal care costs, unaffordable veterinary care, and stigma that comes along with animal rehoming. Yet the more research we do in the field of human-animal interactions, the more we realize how silly this is. Having animal companions is not a recent thing in the history of humanity. In fact, the first instance of pet ownership occurred perhaps as early as 32 thousand years ago (Germonpré et al. 2009). This was so long ago that the earth was in the middle of the Ice Age with humans, Neanderthals, and the Pleistocene megafauna living together. Curiously, Neanderthals didn't seem to have any relationships with dogs; causing scientists to suggest that the human-dog relationship may have ultimately contributed to humans out-competing our cousins (Shipman 2015). The relationship between humans and dogs, even in modern times, is so strong that dog cognition scientists believe that dogs have even evolved a special cognitive capacity to pay attention to human behaviour. As such, nearly all people on earth have some connection to animals in their lives and it becomes rather narrow-minded to think that only a few people "deserve" this human-animal connection that has had 30,000 years of evolutionary

and cultural history. Ultimately, pet-keeping is a fundamental aspect of humanity.

Additionally, the assumption that people have control over their income and should wait until they are financially stable to acquire a pet is also not well supported. Poverty is often a result of systemic issues in society such as economic and social structures that exist that directly or indirectly prevent certain communities of people from financial growth (HSUS n.d.; Powelson, 2021; *essay by Drs. Emilia Gordon and Doris Leung*). When we assume that low-income pet owners are irresponsible, we forget these societal issues. My PhD student, Lexis Ly, has worked for several years connecting animal shelter data to income and other societal factors and has found that areas of economic deprivation are also at a higher risk for various reasons of animal surrender (*essay by Lexis Ly in this issue*) - all reinforcing that personal responsibility ultimately plays only a partial role compared to the role of systemic poverty.

Aside from the evolutionary and moral arguments above, we also have data that shows that low income does not predict a lack of concern for animals. For example, out of pet-owning low-income elderly residents, a quarter reported that, during an evacuation for a natural disaster, they would either not leave because of their pet or only leave if their pet can come along (Rosenkoetter et al. 2007). Another example is that low-income participants in India report more positive attitudes towards community dogs than high- or middle- income participants (Ntampaka et al. 2019) and spend their limited resources feeding those dogs more than other income groups (Bhalla et al. 2021). Human-animal bonds are powerful and play significant roles in family systems of owners (Walsh 2009). Climate change scientists warn us that as more and more people will lose access to global security and resources, we should expect higher poverty throughout, and, sadly, even more social inequities (reviewed in Protopopova et al. 2021). As such, this is the time to remember that people and animals are interconnected and are best considered through the One Welfare lens.

***Assumption #2: There is a single ethic of animal care.***

As an educator, I find that teaching my students about cultural differences in values results in differing views of what it means to behave “responsibly” or ethically towards animals. Students frequently begin their journey in research by quickly jumping to the conclusion that people just need to be “educated” and poor animal treatment will fall away. This, of course, centers the assumption that there is a right and wrong way to care for animals, and that animal ethics represents a rigid concept that people of the world share. Yet, this cannot be further from the truth. Certainly, some human behaviours, such as deliberate injury and cruelty, are unacceptable in all cultures, yet other practices are mediated by the values of that culture.

Because I primarily study dogs, I can give an example of these culturally-mediated value-driven practices in the pet keeping context. In urban areas of Canada, it is unacceptable to allow your dog or cat to roam unsupervised on the street. In fact, even taking your dog off the leash is largely not tolerated. Owners who frequently allow their pets to roam are comfortably labeled as “irresponsible pet owners”. In fact, if one were to state that one plans to allow a cat to go outside, one would be denied an adoption in most Canadian animal rescues. If I can guess why

we are so strict with leash laws and confinement of our pets, it is likely because we value longevity of life, elimination of risk of injury, and feel a responsibility to keep other people unencumbered by our pets. Looking even deeper, one may suspect it is because we think of our pets as something that the owner takes on as a responsibility and is accountable for in society. All of these are important values. Yet in Sweden, confinement of companion animals is seen quite negatively. So much so that many “responsible” Canadian pet keeping practices will be “irresponsible” Swedish practices. For example, keeping a dog confined in a dog crate is illegal and keeping your cat indoors without access to the outside is unethical. Taking it even further, animal shelter staff in India report thinking about dogs as individuals in their own right, responsible for their own actions. They see the role of the human as to not be in the way of the dog living a good life. The values highlighted here may be of autonomy and richness of life experiences (Srinivasa et al. 2022) rather than control and prevention of injury. My goal is not to argue that one set of values is better than another set of values, just that if we do not have universal animal ethics then labels such as “responsible pet owner” or “irresponsible pet owner” become obsolete (Quain 2002; Westgarth et al. 2019).

In teaching students this concept of culturally-mediated animal ethics, I find that necessary skills include learning about different cultures, learning the values of people within other cultures, questioning one’s own cultural attitudes, and learning about qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. This topic naturally ties to the suggestion that incremental care in veterinary medicine can improve access to care and provide culturally appropriate care, which, in my opinion, is a logical conclusion - but I will leave this complex discussion for veterinarians to lead.

### ***Proposing a community care model***

If we are to abandon these two assumptions, what remains? How can we go forward in companion veterinary medicine without these assumptions that are at the core of modern veterinary medicine. As an alternative, I propose a community care model. I have borrowed this term from the sister discipline of animal sheltering of which I am more familiar.

Similar to veterinary medicine, animal sheltering has also had very similar assumptions throughout history that are only now changing across North America. The concept of “responsible pet ownership” meant that animal shelters would be reactive in their activities. They would allow the public to bring in any animal, blame irresponsible pet owners, and kill animals to make room for more intakes. This vicious cycle leads to overcrowding in shelters, reduced capacity of care, which further leads to atrocious animal care resulting in animals leading terrible lives until eventual euthanasia. And seeing this suffering is not easy- animal shelter staff have 5 times higher annual incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress compared to the US average (Andrukonis and Protopopova 2020). And the vicious cycle does not end there; as the public sees the high animal death rate and staff with compassion fatigue reacting aggressively to pet owners, the animal shelters become the “bad guy” – the pound is a bad place, a dangerous place for pets (discussed in Miller and Zawistowski 2012). Certainly not a place to provide community support.

But this is changing. And I hope that veterinary medicine can take some pointers from this change. Fundamentally, the change is attributed to abandoning previously held assumptions, focusing on proactive support of a local community, and actively seeking community partnerships that share the same goal (Fawcett 2019) - promoting animal health and welfare, preventing and relieving animal suffering, and protecting the health of the public and the environment- the same as the oath with which we started.

In the more practical sense, community-based animal sheltering involves thoughtful triage of incoming animals with a focus on preventing intake by supporting the current owner/finder (Hurley 2022). And expanding the animal shelter into the community directly by proactively supporting current owners and finders with financial and other support programs (Mattson 2021) as well as addressing the devastating issues of discrimination within animal shelters themselves (e.g., “Narratives” 2022) thereby attempting to reduce the harm to the human-animal bond that shelters have created themselves with the previously held assumptions.

The community support model in animal sheltering is certainly not without its plethora of problems. Primarily, the lack of funding to carry out programs in the community means that animal shelter staff are tasked with providing this community support yet are not provided enough financial support, materials, or education to complete this important work (Koralesky 2021) potentially contributing to poor occupational health.

So, what might a community care model look like for a small animal veterinarian? Integrate into your local community. Identify what are the current challenges and who is working on those challenges. What is missing? Where can you offer your expertise to tackle those challenges? Remember who you are ultimately serving – the community animals. How can you serve them best without judgement directed towards their guardians. Consider the guardians as partners in care. After all, they are doing the bulk of the care of that particular animal and should be recognized for their contribution. Don’t wait for an animal to come through your door to react. Be creative in proactive programs. If you are seeing more and more reactive behaviours of dogs in a certain community, do not just end your support at berating the owner for not training their dog. Understand the underlying issues. Perhaps the owner is struggling with housing and has obtained a dog for their own safety. In this case, your support may be to be knowledgeable about supportive housing as well as working with the local government to improve human safety for people who are living on the street.

This proactive community care requires a different way to obtain funds rather than relying on owner payment. Social services receive funds from donations, government support, and grants. Animal shelters and community support programs have long abandoned relying on adoption/reclaim/surrender fees to fund their programs. In human medicine, spending money on social services ultimately reduces spending on health (Bradley and Brewster 2019).

Certainly, I am asking you to fight for equity and justice, yet you, the veterinary students, are also those that are in great need for compassion and thoughtful consideration. We, the public,

cannot put the society's burdens on you alone. We must all fight together to not only support the future of veterinary medicine, but also support your initiatives to create a just society where all animals can receive medical help, and all guardians of animals feel supported in providing care. Research is showing us that students in all disciplines struggle with mental health now more than ever due to the climate crisis and associated events, uncertainty of the future, and severe financial insecurity (Appleby et al 2022). On top of that, students within animal welfare and veterinary medicine, have additional struggles of the grandiosity of the problems at hand. Not only are we continuously telling the “new generation” that they are our last hope thus placing immense pressure and guilt upon them to solve the problems we have created, we are also asking our students to “solve” issues that are highly complex and particularly overwhelming. Working within animal welfare already places a serious mental health toll on you, the students, as you are continuously bombarded with information about various cruelties and injustices done to animals. Yet you also see that new humane procedures, albeit empirically supported, are continuously rejected by producers and society leading towards feelings of hopelessness. And now, through education in One Health/ One Welfare, we are asking you to add to your mental suffering by expanding your compassion and activism towards human justice and environmental protection. Thus, as educators, we must also focus on teaching you on how to cope in these impossible times and with such seemingly impossible problems.

So ultimately, how should we actually do this? This, I do not know. Yet, I know that it is important. I urge us all to continue fighting for reform and discovering new ways to engage and deeply integrate into the community. After all, we are all connected. For me, it means teaching students to remember that all animal issues are within the scope of One Welfare and that our respect, compassion, and understanding needs to extend not only to the non-human animals but also to the human animals around us. But perhaps even more importantly, I hope your teachers teach you to respect yourselves and remember that one can only care for others when all is well within ourselves. We, after all, are also the animals that we made an oath to protect and cherish.

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