Veterinary Science Student Preferences for the Source of Dog Cadavers Used in Anatomy Teaching

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Summary — Live animals and cadavers are integral to veterinary education. In the year of this survey (2008), and in at least the five preceding years, cadavers obtained by euthanasia of healthy pound dogs and ex-racing greyhounds were dissected by students, during their veterinary anatomy classes at the University of Queensland School of Veterinary Science. Students may have ethical concerns about this. An alternative approach was to use donated dog cadavers. These are owned pet dogs that have died of natural causes or have been euthanised for medical reasons, and have been donated by their owners for the purposes of veterinary education. Veterinary students at the School were surveyed in 2008, in order to determine their preferences for cadaver source. Data from 406 questionnaires were analysed. Third-year and fifth-year veterinary students were more likely than first-year students to prefer pound-dog/greyhound cadavers over donated cadavers for anatomy dissection (p ≤ 0.002). Between 32% and 45% of the students had no preference for either source of cadaver. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that veterinary students become more accepting of the euthanasia of unwanted healthy animals for education as they progress through the veterinary programme, in contexts such as the current study. This could occur due to increased acceptance of the euthanasia of healthy animals generally, a decline in moral development, desensitisation, and/or the belief that healthy animal cadavers offer a superior learning experience.

Key words: dog cadavers, education, euthanasia, student preferences, veterinary anatomy.

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Introduction

In Australia, both live animals and cadavers are commonly used in veterinary education, in the teaching of veterinary anatomy, pathology, surgery, anaesthesia and clinical procedures to students (1). Live animals might be kept for the purpose of education, or might be privately-owned clinical cases. Cadavers can be obtained from a variety of sources. At some veterinary schools, cadavers are obtained by the euthanasia of healthy but unwanted animals, such as pound dogs and ex-racing greyhounds, or purpose-bred dogs.

Euthanasia to end an animal’s pain and suffering, and/or to prevent spread of disease, is commonly performed by many veterinarians. However, this practice has human costs. A survey of 167 British small animal veterinarians in private practice and veterinary teaching hospitals showed that veterinarians experience a range of emotions, including guilt, anger, depression and a sense of failure, after euthanising pets (2). Veterinary students, who are confronted with the concept of euthanasia during their studies, might have similar feelings. A survey of veterinary students in the final two years of their studies at Murdoch University, Australia, demonstrated that some students find the euthanising of healthy animals very upsetting (3). These reactions are not unexpected, as many students are drawn to the veterinary profession by their compassion for animals (4). There could also be other effects of using these cadavers. Some authors consider that euthanising animals specifically for dissection can lead to the desensitisation of those involved toward harmful animal use (1), and it has been suggested that students who are highly motivated to work in animal care might avoid veterinary education that involves animals being killed for live clinical training and dissection for no medical benefit for the animal concerned (5). The personal attitudes of veterinary students to euthanasia are, in part, shaped during their veterinary education (6), and this could influence their attitudes toward the source of cadaver and the use of euthanasia for teaching purposes.

At Australia’s University of Queensland School of Veterinary Science at the time of the study reported below (2008), and in at least the five preceding years, veterinary anatomy was taught in all terms of the first and second years of the five-year Bachelor of Veterinary Science undergraduate programme. The anatomy teaching involved lectures,