



Elimination of Live Terminal Surgeries in Canadian Veterinary Practice

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Summary

The Veterinary Skills Training and Enhancement Program (VSTEP) is a program at the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) designed to upgrade the skills of foreign-trained veterinarians living in Canada. While the OVC has offered for many years the optional use of non-harmful alternatives to the terminal surgeries performed on live animals as part of the traditional veterinary medical degree, the program included until recently terminal surgeries on animals. As a result of a campaign, these surgeries were eliminated in September 2010. This paper will explore the ethical issues surrounding the surgeries in the VSTEP and the difficulties encountered by students asking for alternatives through the experiences of a recent VSTEP student and InterNICHE member, Dr Anya Yushchenko. The paper also will examine how an alternative program can be successfully implemented and other positive change brought to a veterinary curriculum by way of the combined effort of activists and professionals. Finally, practicalities regarding the successful elimination of terminal surgeries from the curriculum will be discussed, using as an example the rescue from slaughter of purpose-bred sheep by Animal Alliance of Canada.

Keywords: veterinary, live terminal surgeries, alternatives

The Veterinary Skills Training and Enhancement Program (VSTEP) is a program at the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) designed to upgrade the skills of foreign-trained veterinarians living in Canada. While the OVC has offered for many years the optional use of non-harmful alternatives to the terminal surgeries performed on live animals as part of the traditional veterinary medical degree, the program included until recently terminal surgeries on animals. The VSTEP program is a joint venture of the *College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO)*, the *Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA)*, and the *Ontario Veterinary College of the University of Guelph (OVC)*. VSTEP's goal is to be the primary source of education and re-training for internationally educated veterinarians wishing to pursue a rewarding and successful veterinary career.

VSTEP participants receive training in:

- Provision of primary entry-level veterinary care
- Medical records management
- Clinical communication skills
- Performing a physical examination
- Interpreting test results

They acquire specific technical skills relating to anesthesia, surgery, medicine, pathology, pharmacology, and radiology.

Species emphasis is on the dog, cat, horse, and cow. While most of the animals used in the program were involved in mini-

mally invasive procedures, the anesthesia and surgery labs resulted in euthanasia of the animals used. Each participant was supposed to perform an ovariohysterectomy (spay) on an intact female dog, at the end of which the dogs were euthanized. The spay procedure is routinely performed at private veterinary clinics and animal shelters all around the world, and it doesn't result in the death of the animals in most of the cases (statistics vary depending on the country and technique used). VSTEP purchased dogs for the training from a local pound in Guelph and purpose-bred beagles from a supplier in the US. In 2009, 40 dogs were bought for teaching purposes.

A written request was submitted by Dr Anya Yushchenko, a VSTEP student at the time, to a VSTEP official to obtain permission to participate in an alternative program for the anesthesia and surgery lab. The alternative program involves practicing surgical skills on a cadaver and performing anesthesia on animals that later recover. Numerous scientific studies have been published that compare alternative and traditional methods of training and preparing students for clinical practice. The studies demonstrate that alternative programs can satisfy the moral concerns of students while maintaining high standards in the quality of their education¹. For example, some studies have demonstrated that students in alternative training groups who used ethically sourced cadavers and inanimate models gain surgical

¹ Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association. Humane Animal Use/Alternatives: *Humane Teaching Methods – Studies, Publications and Multimedia*. http://www.hsvma.org/resources/humane_teaching_methods.html



skills at least as effectively as students in traditional training groups. Research also shows other advantages, including time saving in anesthesia and the opportunity for repetition on models, which allows for greater familiarity with instruments and skill in routine, as well as non-routine, surgeries upon graduation (Greenfield et al., 1995).

VSTEP declined the request to use an alternative program to practice surgery and thereby violated the university's Animal Use Guidance that says:

"Because it is incumbent upon this University to show leadership in addressing the concerns of the ethics of using animals for instruction or research, individuals contemplating a program involving the use of animals should attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Does this project show a reasonable prospect of yielding new, important knowledge or is it merely a repetition of previous investigations?
2. Can the importance of this research or instructional program be made clear to someone not in your specific discipline?
3. Are animals really needed for this study, or would alternate methods of instruction or research, e.g., computer models, tissue cultures, suffice?
4. If the proposal concerns instruction, would a demonstration suffice, rather than having identical procedures performed by students?
5. Can the procedure be adequately illustrated by audiovisual means? Would this reduce the number of animals used?
6. If animals are absolutely required, what are the minimum numbers needed to achieve the course or research objectives?
7. If animal handling experience is a course objective, have enough directions and laboratory supervision been provided so that the inexperienced student can achieve the appropriate objectives in a humane, esthetic manner?
8. If animals must be used, which species is best suited to the purposes?
9. Will the students have the option of substituting other work if they do not wish to participate? What will they be required to do as a substitute?
10. Will instruction and discussion of the ethics and value of animal use be included in the course?

All the foregoing alternatives must be considered before a proposal is submitted for the use of animals in teaching or research. This is necessary to ensure that animals have to be used in the project and that a minimum number of animals are used to achieve significant results."

OVC has successfully used an alternative program for veterinary students for many years, which is evidence that an effective alternative program was available and could have been used. Nevertheless, VSTEP officials decided not to provide an alternative program based on a statement that the program's protocol does not allow students to participate in alternative programs.

A negotiation process was initiated between Anya Yushchenko and the VSTEP coordinator, in close cooperation with InterNICHE, and a number of solutions were proposed:

1. Performing the surgery on an ethically sourced cadaver: According to InterNICHE policy (Jukes and Chiuia, 2003), "ethically sourced" means that the animals are free-living and are not bred or killed to provide cadavers or tissue for the practical, nor that a market is created or supported for such acquisition. Examples of ethical sourcing include companion animals that have died naturally or in accidents or have been euthanized for medical reasons.
2. Performing surgery on a humane society animal: Students practice surgery under supervision of experienced surgeons and acquire important surgical skills, with the animal shelter getting the procedures performed at minimal cost.
3. Performing surgery in real clinical settings: This can be one of the most successful educational approaches for veterinary students. Clinical practice from a veterinary program provides a diversity of situations that veterinarians will be exposed to after graduation and allows a better transition from academic to "field" practice.
4. Using a surgical model for the procedure: Numerous surgical alternatives are available and widely used for the training of human and veterinary surgeons. OVC itself had developed and implemented a basic surgical skills practice model called "DASIE." More sophisticated mannequins are available for advanced surgical techniques.

Unfortunately the negotiation process with VSTEP was not successful, and legal advice was sought. The Toronto based organization Lawyers for Animal Welfare (LAW) was contacted and explained that, in Ontario, the Human Rights Code requires that every service provides equal treatment without discrimination based on creed. Based on this code, a university must accommodate all students unless doing so would place an undue hardship on the person accommodating, or on the institution. This information was forwarded to VSTEP officials and several days later the changes to a protocol were made. Permission was obtained to recover one dog after the surgical procedure. An 11 month old female beagle named Rainbow was successfully spayed and brought to a caring temporary home. After a month of training and adaptation she was transferred to a permanent home and family.

One year later, in 2010, the Animal Alliance of Canada, with support from InterNICHE, LAW, the media, and animal rights activists started a campaign to eliminate all live animal surgeries in OVC. CBC news broadcasted the "Story of Rainbow" on the national TV channel and the situation concerning terminal surgeries at OVC became public knowledge. Numerous people contacted the college to demonstrate their disapproval of the current practice of killing dogs in order to train veterinarians. Some people decided to withdraw their donations to the university based on the TV reportage.

The combination of all these efforts brought success. In August 2010, the school announced that henceforth all of the beagles used for the VSTEP program would be recovered post-operatively and adopted out.

In September 2010, the OVC announced that they would work towards an alternative-based training system that not only



would change the way veterinary students are taught but help make harmful animal practice a thing of the past. The transition involved using training models, simulators, cadavers, and closely supervised surgery on live animals that benefit from the procedures rather than being killed after surgery. In 2011, Animal Alliance negotiated purchasing purpose-bred sheep that were no longer needed for studies. Most of the sheep have been transferred to a farm sanctuary, castrated, and received necessary medical care.

Conclusion

In the past decade, there has been an increase in public awareness and a growing search for alternatives to the use of experimental animals in education and training. Veterinary students are increasingly making choices to move away from harmful animal use and to acquire knowledge while respecting the integrity of animals' bodies. Numerous alternatives are available to allow high-quality, hands-on education and training in veterinary and human medicine. The case of VSTEP at OVC demonstrates the feasibility of implementing such alternative tools and approaches and the potential of student-based initiatives to catalyze change towards a fully humane education.

References

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