

Student and university perspectives on animal rights and wrongs

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Abstract

This paper is based on the author's experiences facilitating a student animal welfare group at Massey University, New Zealand. Animal Welfare Advocacy Group (AWAG) was created in 2008 by several veterinary students to provide a forum for discussion of animal welfare issues and to raise awareness about such issues in the student and general population. Over the past 4 years, the group has engaged in a number of activities aligned to their mission, including organising presentations on various welfare topics; presenting welfare-related movies; developing an enrichment programme for dogs used in veterinary teaching; and providing a forum for students to voice concerns over the use of animals in science education.

Introduction

In 2008, several veterinary science students at Massey University approached me about acting as staff facilitator for a student animal welfare group. I was recommended to the students because of my experience in animal welfare science which includes completing a PhD in animal behaviour and welfare; teaching an undergraduate animal welfare science paper; actively researching in areas relevant to animal welfare, e.g., animal stress, temperament, pain; collaborating on various projects evaluating animal

welfare, e.g., identification marking of wildlife (DOC), welfare impacts of pest control (MAF); and because I am the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare-Massey liaison and an invited associate of Massey's Animal Welfare Science and Bioethics Centre.

The group was initially called SPACE (Students Promoting Animal Compassion and Ethics), reflecting the fact that the main founders' philosophy tended more towards animal rights than animal welfare. After lengthy discussion, a core group of members decided to rename the group AWAG: Animal Welfare Advocacy Group. We then developed the following mission statement:

To provide non-judgmental support for people interested in animal welfare issues, and to promote positive change in animal welfare policy and practices through raising awareness, education and advocacy.

The statement reflects the Group's moderate position on animal use (i.e. supporting animal welfare rather than rights) and guides its decisions about appropriate activities. However, implied in the phrase '*provide support for people interested in animal welfare issues*' is the Group's responsibility to provide a forum for discussion between parties with differing views on the use of animals.

As far as we are aware, AWAG is the only university student animal welfare group in New Zealand. Several similar groups exist at Australian universities with veterinary schools such as Murdoch University in Perth and the University of Sydney, and most veterinary student associations run a special interest animal welfare group. We are therefore uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for students to contribute to further improving the welfare of the animals with which they interact while at university, especially at Massey University, in New Zealand.

Currently, AWAG has 8-10 core members who meet regularly to organise events and informally discuss issues relating to animal welfare. Most of the committee members are female, studying veterinary science or undertaking postgraduate research in animal welfare science, animal production or veterinary science. There is a larger membership who pay a membership levy, attend events and, occasionally, committee meetings.

Main findings

My involvement with the Group over the past 3 years has highlighted five main points relating to the contributions that university students may make to improve animal welfare in their sphere of influence.

Incremental improvement of animal welfare

AWAG has achieved significant success by incrementally improving animal welfare from within its host institution. As facilitator, one of my roles has been to highlight to members various ways to effect change from their current position. Mellor and Stafford (2001) proposed that significant improvements in animal welfare are most often made incrementally rather than by attempting to achieve a perfect or 'gold-standard' solution immediately, i.e. demanding revolution. In AWAG's case, activities aimed at making small step-wise improvements in the local environment are likely to be viewed as acceptable and attract support. In contrast, attempts to instigate dramatic actions are likely to alienate the host institution and potential community supporters, thereby reducing the group's ability to effect positive change (Mellor & Stafford 2001).

In line with this, AWAG has undertaken a range of activities aimed at increasing awareness of various welfare issues. These include presentations to Massey University students on what animal welfare is; the use of animals in veterinary and science education; organic farming and animal welfare; rescue societies; and welfare volunteer work overseas. In addition, the Group regularly shows movies and documentaries relating to animal welfare.

AWAG students have also worked to directly improve the welfare of animals used in veterinary science education. The Canine Enrichment Programme was initiated in response to concerns held by some students about the experiences dogs

may have during their use in non-invasive teaching exercises. AWAG consulted with stakeholders and developed a successful enrichment programme for the dogs. This included basic training, socialisation and habituation to stimuli commonly encountered in the teaching environment, as well as regular exercise while the dogs were on campus and assisting with re-homing older dogs.

Importantly, AWAG also offers support for concerned university students by providing a forum for discussion about animal welfare issues (see below).

Student concerns relate to lack of information

Student concerns fielded by AWAG relate mainly to lack of information about the use of animals in veterinary/science education. Particular issues of concern have been: the source of animals used for anatomy dissections; non-recovery surgical training; what to do about welfare concerns arising during veterinary practical work placements; and, as mentioned above, the experiences of dogs used in non-invasive teaching exercises.

Massey University has an international reputation for its implementation of the Three Rs in veterinary and science education. For example, innovations such as the use of Computer Aided Learning have dramatically reduced the number of animals used for teaching purposes (Davies 1997; 2000; 2004; Dewhurst & Davies 2000). It is important for this fact to be explicitly communicated to students both at the beginning of, and during their veterinary education, along with information on the sources and numbers of animals used.

To illustrate this point, one first-year student reported being so upset at the thought that a dog had been euthanased simply for the purpose of anatomy dissection that she refused to participate in the exercise. She said afterwards that had she known the source of the dog and that it was to be euthanased anyway, her concerns would have been much reduced and she would have made better use of the resource. This highlights the importance of providing students with information before each teaching session to ensure that the value of animals used in teaching is maximised.

To try to circumvent such concerns, AWAG arranged for a staff member to present information

on animal use in the veterinary science degree – this lunchtime session was exceptionally well attended and some of this information is now routinely presented to first-year veterinary students before they begin their dissections. In addition, AWAG members draw the existence of the Group and its role to the attention of the first-year class at the beginning of each year.

Group activities reflect the philosophy of members

The objectives and activities of groups formed around emotionally charged issues such as some of those related to animal welfare depend strongly on the personal philosophies of their members. Initially, AWAG included several members holding viewpoints more consistent with animal rights than welfare; these members are credited for their initiative and passion in founding the Group. Unfortunately, several of these members became disillusioned by the generally moderate position and conservative activities agreed upon by the Group, and left relatively early on, partly for this reason. This was a loss to AWAG as a range of viewpoints is valuable for exploring welfare issues in depth.

As AWAG's membership has changed, its objectives and activities have evolved. In keeping with the philosophy of the founding members, early events included a community screening of the animal rights documentary 'Earthlings'. In contrast, the current membership is more involved in the Canine Enrichment Programme and organising scientific experts to discuss various animal welfare issues with interested students. I see these types of activities as more sustainable and aligned with the incremental improvement strategy.

Affiliation with a university confers advantages and responsibilities

Affiliation with, and support from, a university host confers both advantages and responsibilities on the Group, particularly on the staff facilitator. AWAG has enjoyed a number of advantages as a result of being hosted by Massey University. These include access to physical resources and meeting spaces and opportunities to apply for funding to support the group's activities, e.g., UFAW link funding was used to buy supplies for the Canine Enrichment Programme. In addition, we have had access to world experts in

areas such as animal welfare science, animal behaviour, and veterinary medicine.

With these advantages come responsibilities to our university host. The animal-based research and teaching at the university, although fully approved by the mandatory animal ethics committee system (Mellor & Bayvel 2008), could nevertheless attract the attention of some animal rights groups. Therefore, AWAG members decided to limit engagement as a group with organisations such as Save Animals From Exploitation (SAFE). In other words, members are free to participate in events organised by these groups as individuals but not under AWAG's banner. We felt that alignment with more extreme groups would limit our ability to improve welfare within our local environment. As a facilitator, I periodically inform the head of my institute of the group's activities; I see this as important to prevent misconceptions about the group and its intentions among university staff.

Some Massey veterinary students appear confused about the difference between animal rights and welfare

The differences between animal rights and animal welfare are discussed with first-year veterinary students as part of their formal course work. However, AWAG has received several anecdotal reports suggesting that there is confusion among veterinary students about the distinction. For example, veterinary science students within AWAG report that some of their peers are reluctant to engage with the Group for fear of being labelled an 'animal rightest'. For those with a strong 'animal use' philosophy, AWAG may indeed be perceived as an animal rights group, despite its moderate position on the rights-welfare continuum. Even those students who themselves have a clear understanding of the distinction may feel uneasy about openly engaging in animal welfare-related activities if they believe that there might be confusion in the wider veterinary profession, i.e. their potential employers.

It is currently unknown whether these perceptions are held only by a small proportion of the veterinary student population or instead reflect more widespread confusion and unease. There would be merit in exploring the extent to which this confusion actually exists within the veterinary student population and, in fact, the wider veterinary profession in New Zealand.

If widespread, the distinction between animal rights and welfare may need to be reinforced throughout the veterinary degree.

Conclusions

The findings discussed in this paper highlight the value of university student animal welfare groups, both for animals and for people. Such groups can make incremental improvements to animal welfare in their local environment through direct animal-related activities and by raising awareness, particularly among students studying animal-based sciences, including veterinary science. In addition, these groups can play an important role by providing support for their fellow students. Operating within a university environment confers both advantages and responsibilities upon such groups and their facilitators.

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