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CONFEREN CE REPORT

Report on the 1998 ACLAM Forum

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The American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine, a specialty board of the American Veterinary Medical Association, held a conference in May 1998 entitled Bioethics and the Use of Laboratory Animals—Ethics in Theory and Practice. More than 225 veterinarians, Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) chairpersons, and others met to learn from and interact with an internationally recognized group of philosophers, ethicists, scientists, veterinarians, and research advocates.

The College initiated this forum because of the central role that its membership plays in promoting the humane use of animals in research, testing, and education. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the philosophical, religious, and secular-ethical theories regarding the individual's relationship with and obligations to animals and of the application of such theories to one's professional conduct. In addition, speakers addressed specific nonhuman animal (e.g., genetic engineering) and human (e.g., end-of-life decisions) ethical concerns.

CHALLENGES

A. L. Kraus, chair, made the introductory remarks, stressing the critical role that veterinarians in the specialty play in improving animal welfare and adding that the speakers would challenge a participant's long-held assumptions and values. Kraus
raised the central question: “Why is it (or is it not) ethically permissible to inflict harms upon sentient animals?” He acknowledged what many see as an “ethical conflict-of-interest” for veterinarians in this specialty, the only one in veterinary medicine that purposely harms animals. He contended, however, that the use of animals in research is more readily justified than that of most other uses. He also emphasized the need for specialists to be better prepared to discuss the ethical issues surrounding animal use. Although the College has taken a leadership role in improving animal welfare, this Forum challenged participants to deal with this issue objectively and honestly. Kraus distributed a glossary of terms frequently used, as well as misused, by many in the current debate. He said that lack of a commonly agreed-on lexicon often hampers meaningful dialog. He urged all to define what they meant by such terms if they differed from the prepared definitions. Unfortunately, few speakers did.

Beauchamp discussed philosophical underpinnings of animal ethics. He argued that animals have rights because of the theory of correlativity between obligations and rights. If we have obligations toward animals, Beauchamp contends that correlative rights for animals naturally follow.

Both Beauchamp and Rowan addressed the role that formal “principles” play in human and animal ethics. They asserted that principles, as well as other forms of moral reasoning and arguments, are important and necessary in making ethical choices.

Parker and Chapple presented papers on views of Western or Judeo-Christian, Islamic, and Eastern religions about animals. Most attendees acknowledged the influence that individual religious views exert on objective thinking about secular theories and their consequences on our use of animals.

SECULAR VIEWS AND ISSUES

There were three secular views articulated: Singer discussed the utilitarian view, Jerrold Tannenbaum discussed the rights-based, and DeGrazia, a view based on a form of Moral Pluralism. Singer disappointed some persons. Although he clearly described utilitarian theory and the principle of “equal consideration,” he did not apply his views on how the theory would influence ethical choice. During a breakout group that he and Kraus cofacilitated, however, he stated his nonabolitionist position regarding the use of animals in research. Tannenbaum described various versions of rights-based views—from the hard rights position of Regan and Francione to the more moderate views that accept certain rights of certain animals and yet assert that those rights are not absolute. He urged the veterinarians in attendance not to dismiss any concept of rights for animals because of the way the hard or abolitionist-rightist philosophers, attorneys, and activists use the term, asking that they reflect instead on his description of the basis for rights of animals. He argued that...
veterinarians could subscribe to a moderate view of animal rights that would be productive and affect society’s views of our relationship to other beings.

DeGrazia described a view that argues, not for a single overarching characteristic such as “the ability to suffer,” as in utilitarian theory, or “being the subject of a life,” as in rights theory, but for a more biologically and ethically relevant complex of characteristics. The complex would include the differing abilities of animals to experience adverse mental states. DeGrazia subscribes to a limited use of animals in research and, as beings become more “complex,” to an increase in the ethical burden placed on researchers to justify harmful use. He extends “serious” but not necessarily “equal” consideration to the morally relevant characteristics of animals. On the other hand, he would prohibit the use of higher primates in harmful research. As they are able to experience adverse mental states, he also would include some invertebrates (e.g., the octopus) as objects of our moral concern.

A portion of the program was devoted to human ethical issues, including “End-of-Life” decisions by Veatch. Veatch also delivered a paper entitled “The Brave New World—A Speculative Look to the Future,” in which he described an unsettling scenario of future human health care. Rollin and Gordon, the noted scientists who started the transgenic revolution, presented an interesting and contrasting look at the ethical implications of genetic engineering.

CONVERSATION, ATTITUDES, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Singer gave the keynote address on “The Great Ape Project.” Seated at the luncheon table with Singer, in addition to the ACLAM president and Kraus were a scientist who has used nonhuman primates in hepatitis research, a veterinarian hired by the University of Pennsylvania following the Genarelli “Head Trauma” expose, a veterinarian who was brought in to evaluate the conditions incident to the Taub Silver Spring monkey incident, a consultant to the Coulston Foundation, and Rollin. The composite group stimulated interesting conversation. Throughout the Forum there was this remarkable interaction between the speakers and the veterinarians.

The final session dealt with public attitudes and accountability, with presentations by Rowan, representatives of animal research advocacy groups (Americans for Medical Progress Educational Foundation and National Association for Biomedical Research), Paris and Rich, Nathanielz (internationally noted scientist and former People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals “vivisector of the month”), and Hamm, ACLAM diplomate.

ACLAM considered the Forum a huge success, a giant step forward in its maturation as a specialty board, and one with profound implications for its future. Plenary speakers have submitted manuscripts that, along with the edited summaries of the question and answer periods and the breakout discussion groups, ACLAM will publish late in 1998. Look for availability on the ACLAM home page on the World Wide Web: www.aclam.org.