

# Veterinary Students

## Learning to Heal Without Learning to Kill

Lucy Fish is a fourth-year veterinary student at the University of Sydney, Faculty of Veterinary Science. In the following article, Ms. Fish recounts her experience as a conscientious objector to the harmful use of animals for her veterinary education.



*Lucy Fish and her dog Rupee, whom she adopted from the animal shelter where she performed her practice work.*

Ever since I first discovered what a veterinarian was, I have wanted to become one. For me it meant being in the ultimate position to help animals by having the ability to save lives and prevent animal suffering.

In 1997, I was accepted into the five-year Veterinary Science degree at the University of Sydney. Having refused to do dissections in my previous schooling and being involved in the anti-vivisection movement from an early age, I was horrified to discover that dissection and vivisection of healthy animals was a required part of the veterinary curriculum. Not only was this a fact that

no one seemed to question, but also there appeared to be no other way to learn how to become a competent veterinarian. I felt that my beliefs must therefore be inappropriate in this case and started first-year anatomy dissections with the aim of "overcoming" these feelings and in a way desensitize myself. After all, it is not hard for a 17-year-old to feel intimidated by grey-haired academics in a totally unfamiliar environment. We were fed lies about the failings of veterinary graduates in the UK because they did not perform lethal surgeries and told horror stories of dogs being bandaged to stop the abdominal contents from falling out after spays.

# Making a Difference

It was not until my third-year, when faced with the task of conducting post-mortem examinations on healthy dogs from the pound who had died of lethal injections, that I started to question how it was possible for my ethical beliefs to be wrong. I knew that I had survived the dissections only by distancing the flesh and blood I had before me from the living, feeling, healthy animal they had once been. Now I was faced with the grim reality of the system I had become a part of, with not only a live animal in front of me, but also one whom I was required to take for walks, anesthetize, perform surgery on, and then kill.

The animals received for classes were surplus to an industry that I abhor: the greyhound racing industry. It discards these graceful creatures when they are no longer fast enough to be profitable. I could feel the perceived intrinsic values of the animals decreasing in the eyes of students, not only through using them to "practice" on, but by the utilitarian view that had been pushed onto us since first-year: because these animals were unwanted by society, for us to use them somehow made their miserable fates justified.

After a relatively brief search on the Internet, I was able to gather quite a library of information through contacting animal welfare groups and other students facing similar situations around the world. I discovered that, not only was the implementation of alternative programs expanding rapidly in the U.S. and Europe, but also there was ample evidence demonstrating their effectiveness to be equal to or better than traditional methods.

After discussions with the appropriate veterinary faculty at my university, I was told that while no alternative program currently existed at the University of

Sydney, my ethical beliefs were respected and that alternative ways to teach me would be sought. I was surprised and delighted to receive such a response, as I had become quite familiar with the battles students had fought elsewhere with their uncompromising universities. I was concerned about students who would follow after me who did not want to do these practicals, and I was told that an official alternatives program would not be put in place as the university was currently making moves to phase out these practicals altogether.

I felt it was vitally important to let others know that they did not have to vivisect to become a veterinarian, as I had heard stories of students dropping out or not even applying for the program for this reason. In October 1999, Andrew Knight, a conscientiously objecting vet student from Murdoch University in Perth, came to Sydney to give presentations on alternatives. We were able to gain some publicity, with the hope that this message would get out to current and perspective veterinary students.

During the 1999 summer vacation, I spent some time at animal shelters learning surgery, anesthesia and other general veterinary skills. In preparation, I reviewed my notes, watched videos, and practiced the basic surgical preparations of gowning and gloving, as well as suture techniques, at home. My first surgical experiences were cat and dog castrations. This was followed by observing spays and other operations, then assisting with minor parts such as ligations, making incisions, and skin suturing. I then worked my way up to performing unassisted spays (but always with veterinary supervision). I have learned the principles of soft tissue handling, hemostasis, and surgical technique through performing spays and castrations. This enables me to feel

confident about assisting with further beneficial operations during the remainder of my veterinary education.

I am now more confident than ever that surgery not only can be taught this way, but that it should be taught this way. Learning basic surgery by performing castrations and spays has so many benefits. Instead of taking advantage of the huge surplus of unwanted animals that society creates, you are actively doing something about the problem: preventing overpopulation by performing spays and castrations on animals who benefit from it. The student works with the same animal from premedication, anesthesia and surgery, through recovery until the next morning when the animal is ready to go home or be returned to the animal shelter for adoption. In addition, the student is given the opportunity to work with a variety of breeds. The experience I gained also allowed for a natural progression of my surgical skills from performing a simple cat castration through to a more complicated dog spay.

It is important for students to realize that they cannot be forced to harm animals in the name of education. The information and resources are out there with so many caring people willing to help you get started. Students should never be intimidated into thinking that their ethical beliefs are wrong. My story is testimony to the fact that there is no need to kill to learn how to heal.

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