Letters to the Editor

Disagrees with AVMA stand on foie gras production

I read with dismay (but no surprise) the conclusion of the AVMA to forgo making a stand against foie gras production (JAVMA, September 1, 2005, pp 688–689). Rural farms with caretakers who honored the moral contract with their animals were displaced long ago by operations geared toward whatever gives the most profit. In my opinion, our AVMA has gone right along with this trend, nodding and rarely ever saying anything against industrial practices.

Time and time again our committees debate and then fail to decry practices abhorred by anyone who truly cares about animals (we who regularly anthropomorphize are continually disappointed). Like most AVMA members, I am a small animal veterinarian. Our whole professional lives are geared toward trying to prevent and treat disease; educate clients on proper (if not pampered) housing, diet, and care for their pets; and finally, provide for a peaceful, painless, and dignified death at the end. You cannot convince me that our food animals do not deserve the same.

Sadly, our AVMA is a puppet to big industry, afraid to say the emperor has no clothes. Who do you represent? Do not assume that all who pay dues agree with the organization’s direction or conclusions.

Gretchen Yost, DVM
Santa Cruz, NM

More on law/animal rights

In response to the recent letters on lawyers/animal rights (JAVMA, September 1, 2005, pp 705–706), I believe Dr. Silverman is clear and agree that society will judge us as a profession on our stand in these issues. I believe that the concept of animals as sentient beings or something similar will eventually come upon us whether we like it or not. I believe we need to take a proactive stance on this subject to make it clear to the public that we are a part of a caring profession, which, in my opinion, they would very much like to believe.

I don’t believe we have to change overnight, but I do believe we need to be open to change and be headed uphill.

I do not feel we can compare pets to heirlooms. This is apples-to-oranges thinking, although both heirlooms and pets may induce sentimental feelings. However, animals feel pain and induce a human-animal bond and anthropomorphic ideals in their owners and others about the sensations animals can experience, such as fear, loneliness, and grief. It doesn’t matter if they do or do not scientifically. People think they do. This isn’t about science. It’s about perceptions.

Clearly, this kind of change would not make life easier in a throw-away pet society or in animals with clear economic value. And, sorry, wildlife veterinarians, but when free-roaming cats are sentient beings, it may be a little off-putting to organize cat hunts. However, I never thought those were going to do much for our image when so many people think of James Herriot when they think of a veterinarian.

As a small animal practitioner, I have never had regrets charging a fair price for thorough, quality work, nor complaints. I have always been proud of this profession. In the future, I would like to see us grow by our own will in ways that will demonstrate our willingness to change while keeping the needs of the patients first, the clients second, and ourselves last.

Rick Wulff, DVM
Archer, Fla

The authors respond:

It was kind of Dr. Wulff to express his support for the comments regarding the property status of nonhuman animals. In turn, we support his position that pets and heirlooms are not to be considered on an equal basis. The fact is that many courts have treated heirlooms very differently from other kinds of property; for example, a court may set a value on an heirloom that is beyond the market value of the object, while in other instances, a court may order the specific heirloom, rather than a similar or identical object, returned to a person.

The relationships we have with our nonhuman companions are often described as those of true family members, which makes them richer and more complicated than our relationships to heirlooms. The tenuous relationship between the two concepts is indicated by the fact that in some states (for example, California) the property status of heirlooms is established under the law of domestic relations (divorce and custody) and not under the law of property.

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between sentient life and its economic value is clearly demonstrated by financial awards made by juries to a parent upon the death of a child. Do we value the child’s life on the basis of the act that led to his death? Is there truly any good basis for determining the economic value of a child’s life? We are of the opinion that as with the child, it is the human investment with memories of the companion animal that, more and more, is making the law pay attention.

An important caveat to this letter is that we focus on “companion” nonhuman animals. It might be construed that only those animals treasured by humans should receive the legal protection of the courts. We do not wish to imply that other animals have less importance but only that we have chosen to focus on the issues raised here in Dr. Wulff’s letter as well as in Dr. Parker’s earlier response (JAVMA, September 1, 2003, pp 705–706).

To provide some or all nonhuman animals, companion or otherwise, with the protection of the courts has been advocated in various ways. Some of these proposals suggest inappropriate rights while others carry the danger of relegating all nonhumans to the status of mere property. Nevertheless, we suggest that the veterinary profession needs to engage eagerly in open-minded, compassionate discussions about which animals need which legal protections. Such full participation would be a very helpful addition as our society attempts to see the possibilities that lie ahead.

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Additional comments on revised sow housing policy

Most veterinarians, I would guess, assiduously avoid confrontations that might create disharmony in their working environment. For many, perhaps, a laissez-faire attitude on controversial animal welfare matters would be all-important for maintenance of effective client-veterinarian relationships. Thus it is that I understand the uneasy alliance between organized veterinary medicine and pork producers in vertically integrated operations that seem to accord higher priority to profit than to creature comforts. But I do not understand the seemingly never-ending juggling of the wording in the AVMA’s position statement about so-called sow gestation crates.

As a farm-raised boy in the ’30s and ’40s, when animal husbandry was a term that translated to sincere solicitude for animal welfare; as a large animal practitioner in the late ’50s and early ’60s, before the swooping corporate takeover of agribusiness; and as an erstwhile long-time AVMA employee who went with the flow on most controversial professional matters, I believe I have at least minimal credentials to address the subject broached by Drs. Hansen and Bowden in the September 15, 2005, issue of JAVMA (p 882).

As Hansen and Bowden more or less implied in their thoughtful letter, the intangible cost that detracts from tangible profit in a solitary-confinement farrowing enterprise is compromise. Not compromise exclusively for the producer but secondarily, at least, for our profession.

Our long-standing rationalization over the deprivation of freedom of movement of pre- and postparturient sows has not added to the plus side of our professional ledger. On the other hand, I suppose it could be argued that the issue of an animal industry’s questionable husbandry practices is not a legitimate entry for either side of our ledger. Some folks might well say that it is the industry’s public relations problem, not ours. Nevertheless, somehow the hot potato landed in our lap, and we are now honor-bound to uphold an oath I read somewhere about doing what we can to promote animal welfare.

Two or three years ago, an AVMA delegate stood tall in the House of Delegates as an ombudsman for porcine critters. If I may be granted the license of liberal paraphrasing, he asked somewhat as follows: Do we need to wait for science to assure us through statistical analysis, perhaps to the ultimate of P < 0.001, that total confinement of sows in gestation crates is humane or is not humane when any human being with any intuitive sense of what is right and wrong can discern that such confinement flies in the face of what any of us would accept for ourselves?

I feel a tad sorry for folks who wrestle with rhetoric to convince themselves and others that the naked emperor is indeed wearing clothes. It is a lose-lose proposition. I trust that those who carve out AVMA position statements on matters involving animal welfare will carefully read and digest the letter by Drs. Hansen and Bowden. It was a keeper.

Albert J. Koltveit, DVM, MS
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I hope that Drs. Hansen and Bowden can find an organization with views compatible with their definition of moral authority (JAVMA, September 15, 2005, p 882). As a food animal practitioner, my belief is that the AVMA is a professional/scientific organization—I do not rely on it for moral guidance. If I desire guidance on moral issues, a wide variety of other organizations are available. Philosophic debate, while intellectually stimulating, is not the AVMA’s main reason for being, I hope. Consequently, I do not believe the AVMA needs to take positions on every individual animal-handling practice presented and certainly not on an unscientific basis. Those unscientific issues should be addressed with the respective commodity groups, producers, or legislative bodies or through the market.

I would prefer, of course, that the AVMA mirrors my view, which is that my responsibility is to the animals as they are presented to me and to provide the advice I believe necessary to their caretakers. Although I may advise on production practices on which I am knowledgeable, I avoid alienating caretakers by lecturing them on my...