

The Future of Animal Welfare

“The Students of Today will be the Leaders of Tomorrow”

CanFACT recently asked Dr. Ian Duncan to comment on the work of the University of Guelph in exposing students to the challenge of introducing more humane systems of raising, transporting and slaughtering animals for food. We reprint a selection from his reply.

Dr. Duncan is the Director of the “Col. K.L. Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare” at the University of Guelph.

The most exciting thing for me has been the great increase in interest in animal welfare matters among undergraduate students. This is reflected in student numbers registering for my course, ***Principles of Farm Animal Care and Welfare***. When I took over this course eight years ago, it had 40 students registered. It has grown and grown until this semester there are 150 students registered! It is now a required course for all Animal Science and Animal Biology students and most of these students take the course in their third year. They account for about 80 students. The rest are students from across campus, from Fine Arts to Physics. I think the publicity that the course gained from winning the inaugural award given by the Humane Society of the United States for the best course in North America dealing with animals and society has really helped. You can imagine that it is a lot of work to organize this number of students. An integral part of the course is a weekly seminar session in which the class meets in groups of about 20 to discuss animal welfare matters, carry out roll-playing exercises, watch controversial videos, take part in debates, and so on. During these exercises they learn to respect other people’s points of view, and really question their own values. This year I have seven groups to organize - which takes all my juggling skills!

I am convinced that ***this*** is going to be the foundation for radically improved animal welfare in years to come. As you know, I have been working in the field of animal welfare, particularly farm animal welfare, since 1965. Up until now I have been very disappointed with the lack of progress that has been made, despite the fact that animal welfare science has produced a wealth of information. However, I am now realizing that this will have to be an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, process. These young people who are taking my course, in 20 years time, will be the agricultural leaders in our society - and they will have a very enlightened view of how animals should be treated.

The second thing I would like to tell you about is the Veterinary Students Animal Welfare Club. As you know, for several years, they have organized the “Care-a-thon” meeting in the fall each year. Well, they are now expanding and this year they have organized a panel discussion on the topic of “The Use of Animals in Teaching”. This will take place on Tuesday evening March 25th. There will be a panel comprising two professors from the Vet College with rather different views on animal use, two vet students with different views and Stephanie Brown, the Animal Rights activist from Toronto. I have asked a new Bioethicist in our Philosophy Department to give a brief review of the topic to start with, and then the panel will answer questions from the audience.

Of course, the Ontario Veterinary College is leading the way in North America with regard to reducing animal use in teaching. For example, Drs. Holmberg and Cockshutt have developed an artificial dog abdomen dubbed “Daisie” (Dog Abdominal Surrogate for

Instructional Exercises) on which vet students can practice surgery when they previously would have used dogs. This means that the surgical skills of vets can be honed without subjecting real dogs to the trauma of surgery.

Dr. Dobson has developed Otis (from the Greek “osteon” or bone) which is a dog skeleton made with real dog bones but connected so that joints can move in a realistic way. It is all covered with a “body” made of felt. This allows students to practice taking X-rays of various parts of an animal without exposing a real animal to radiation. So Otis means that far fewer dogs are exposed to radiation or to anaesthetic and students can gain skills in positioning dogs for X-ray.

My own group of Graduate Students continues to explore ways in which the lives of farm animals can be improved. Currently, I have one student working on feather pecking in chickens. If we can solve this problem, then we can set about getting the painful procedure of de-beaking banned. I have another two students working on individual recognition in pigs. If we can understand how pigs recognize each other, then we can design environments in which they can live in social harmony with no fighting. Another of my students is working on fish. She is showing that they are sentient creatures that can experience fear, frustration and pain and therefore deserve more consideration in aquaculture than they currently receive.

There are a few individuals across Canada working on welfare - but the total numbers are small and we are all working on shoe-string budgets! There is no doubt in my mind that the way ahead is through education and the place to start is at the undergraduate level. When young people leaving university have an appreciation of what constitutes a good life for animals, they will go out and live their lives accordingly. Some will become teachers and educate children in welfare matters. Some will become medical and biological researchers and seek to improve the welfare of animals in those fields. Others will go into farming or attain leadership roles in agriculture and gradually change the way in which farm animals are kept.

I have always said that I look forward to the day when all animals in human care have good lives and painless deaths. I think if we can maintain or increase the level of animal welfare education at the university level, I might actually live to see the arrival of that day in Canada!