

An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics: Theory and Cases

B E Rollin (1999). Iowa State University Press: Ames. 420pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, PO Box 570, 2121 S State Ave, Ames, Iowa 50010-0570, USA (ISBN 0813816599). Price US\$39.95.

Ethics – the study of the moral rules we, consciously or even unconsciously, use in deciding the rightness/wrongness, goodness/badness, justice/injustice of any human activity has, in recent years, become an important issue in the biological and especially the applied biological sciences. Ethics, and perhaps more directly bio-ethics (ethics as applied to human actions in the biological sciences), are now widely taught and debated within many professional and scientific organizations. The application or mis-application of biological science findings to humans, animals or the environment is now the concern of many thoughtful members of society and attracts much attention in the media.

Veterinary medical ethics – a combination of the ethics of professional conduct and the relevant parts of bioethics is, as yet, little taught in the veterinary schools in the UK. This is somewhat surprising, as practising veterinarians have always had to grapple with ethical problems as they struggle with the often-conflicting interests of the animal, the animal's owner and the public good. As Bernard Rollin states: 'Almost all veterinarians are "closet moral philosophers"...'.

The book itself – as its subtitle correctly suggests – is made up of 2 parts: an extended 75-page essay on the theory underlying veterinary medical ethics and then some 82 real-life veterinary case histories which have inherent ethical implications, and Rollin's extended comments thereon. These case histories etc were originally published between January 1991 and June 1998 in the *Canadian Veterinary Journal*.

The theoretical part of the book considers such matters as the difference between social consensus ethics, personal ethics and professional ethics. The point is made that over time, ethical issues may move from one area to another. Human sexual behaviour for example has, of late, largely shifted from the public to the private domain – ie from social ethics to personal ethics; while the use of animals by man has been moving in the reverse direction – ie from the personal to the social arena. Until recently animals were mainly considered as property, with the owner having near complete say as to how they should be treated – the restricting element being the somewhat limited cruelty to animals laws (laws, in Rollin's words are an example of consensus social ethics writ large). Nowadays, animals are being increasingly protected by a society which is currently developing strong views as to how they should or should not be used.

It is suggested that, in an ideal society, the professions could largely be left to regulate their own affairs. The argument is made that they, from their specialist knowledge, should know best what can or cannot be allowed. In the modern world, however, professions are being portrayed more as closed groups dedicated mainly to their own advantage and not necessarily working to the general good. In response to this the veterinary profession, like other professional groups, will have to show an increasing amount of public accountability in how it runs itself. If it is not seen to put its own house in order, others will be only too willing to do it.

Rollin makes the point that western society has developed, in his view anyway, a reasonably good mechanism for maximizing the interests of both the social body and the individual. This is attained from the interplay of a consequentialist ethic (eg utilitarianism – the judging of an action by its effect on the sum total of goodness/badness, pleasure/pain etc) with the concept of an individual's rights. Rights can be seen as a protective fence put up

around humans to guard them from the sometimes over-invasive interests of society as a whole. This, of course, leads on to the problem of whether or not animals have rights and to what Rollin believes is a fundamental question in veterinary ethics: does the veterinary surgeon have prior obligation to the animal or its owner?

Rollin suggests that in tackling veterinary ethical problems, the veterinarians may find it useful to consider the interplay of five (usually separate) sets of obligations: to client, animal, profession, self and society – and that in contrasting and comparing these obligations at least partial solutions may often be found.

The 82 case histories, which range over a wide selection of the ethical dilemmas that can confront the practising veterinarian, are each presented in a standard way. The problem itself and the basic ethical question(s) are set out on a right hand page, while the professional ethicist's (ie Rollin's) considered response (judgement) is found by turning over the page. This format allows one to initially consider the problem in isolation from the written 'solution'. I found it advantageous to read the case history, make a quick gut-reaction decision, then to think about the five separate sets of obligations (mentioned above) and finally to turn the page over and read the considered opinion of the professional ethicist. The judgements have, at times, a somewhat North American flavour – with perhaps an overemphasis on animal rights – but it is still most revealing to see how the arguments go and the decisions are made. It is obvious that the reader is not always going to agree – in fact I was annoyed, at times, at the ethical stances taken, but at least I had been drawn into the ethical discussion and forced to face up to the possibility of compromise and/or agreement.

The book finishes with a bibliography of some 38 references and an index which takes in both the case histories and the extended essay on the theory of ethics. It is a pity that, at the end of the theory section, Rollin did not include a short, critically annotated list of the ethical literature which might be readily available to the field veterinarian. The 'closet moral philosopher' of the veterinary world might easily be stimulated by this book and yet not readily know where to go to advance his/her understanding. The bibliography is useful, but a critically annotated list would have been better.

In nearly every way, this book is a fine, well-written, well-argued and readily accessible introduction to the theory and practice of veterinary medical ethics. It could form the basis of a good veterinary undergraduate course and it should be in the library of every veterinary institution. More importantly, all veterinary practitioners, field workers, researchers, nurses and students should read, think about and be willing to act upon the critical issues it raises.

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Equine Behaviour: Principles and Practice

D Mills and K Nankervis (1999). Blackwell Science Ltd: Oxford. 230pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0EL, UK (ISBN 0632048786). Price £19.99.

The ground covered by this book meets the very broad basic needs of many undergraduate life science students. A couple of minor errors and the occasionally bewildering cartoon do not detract from an exemplary textbook that makes few assumptions regarding the reader's level of equestrian experience or training in behavioural biology. The reader is taken patiently through such core principles as taxonomy and neural transmission as well as a discussion of Lamarck versus Darwin. This elemental and thorough approach reflects the