

Of Dogs and Doctors

By Richard Ginsberg *COLORADO VOICES*

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Class started yesterday, but the real-life test is today.

The exam question is this: Is it ethical to dissect live dogs, and subsequently kill them, in the name of medical school training?

Each spring, first-year students at the University of Colorado Medical School take a required course on ethical decision making offered by the Program in Health Care Ethics, Humanities, and Law. The department has a vital task; it trains doctors to be torch-holders of ethical, legal, and compassionate practice.

The first ethics class came on the eve of a maelstrom. A protest will be held this morning from 7 – 9 a.m. in front of the CU Medical Center at 8<sup>th</sup> and Colorado to greet first-year students as they head to the dog killings that occur in their physiology lab course. A candlelight vigil for the estimated 72 canine victims will be held at the same location at 7 p.m. this evening. The students can opt out of the labs with “no penalty”, but are still tested on the lab material.

While over half of this country’s medical schools, and most of its veterinarian schools, abandon dog-killing labs in favor of more ethical training, CU sits on its hands.

Students are faced with a decision they shouldn’t have to make.

All ethical dilemmas are by nature difficult, and the health care field is replete with them. Dr. Richard Martinez, coordinator of the ethics course, states the curriculum “sits humanities side by side with scientific and technological education to give students opportunities to reflect on the implications of what they learn in training”. Among other course assignments, students read literature with medical and ethical themes to help them develop their ethical sensitivity and professional identities.

It is the perfect course to help medical students grapple with the current ethical dilemma.

An equally perfect work from the field of Humanities should guide them: “Of Mice and Men” by Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck.

In his story of lonely, journeymen farmhands, Steinbeck includes a heart-wrenching scene in which a callous man named Carlson spontaneously convinces a co-worker that his old, beloved dog is no longer of use and should be shot in the head. The co-worker, a soft-spoken man named Candy, reluctantly gives up his dog, and moments later Steinbeck describes the sound of a distant gunshot as a morose Candy stares at the ceiling, his silence reflective of deep regret.

Steinbeck uses almost identical language to describe the novel’s last scene, in which the main character, George, shoots his friend, Lennie, in the head to save him from a lynch mob. He also gives the last line of his great novel to Carlson. While watching the deeply saddened George and another farmhand walk from Lennie’s fresh corpse, Carlson asks a bystander “Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?”

Steinbeck was no dummy.

He wanted to sear into readers’ minds that Carlson didn’t understand something very important. Steinbeck recognized that compassion for animal life was reflective of compassion for human life. It is for this exact

reason that psychologists place the requisite of cruelty to animals directly next to cruelty to people when diagnosing Conduct Disorder in children.

The most important lesson the unfortunate dogs are teaching medical students is not about physiology, it's about ethics. It is a lesson better taught by Martinez in his noteworthy class than through the unnecessary death of animals. A competitive educational system that provides the "option" of killing dogs really encourages the practice, and is too cowardly and uncreative to do what is right - rely on adequate alternatives.

I don't want future doctors to be Carlsons, hardened at the death of sentient beings. And I don't want them to be Candys either, led by seductive arguments to feel the blood of dogs on their hands.

The students can ace this test.

They should choose not to kill.

They should make Steinbeck proud.

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