

Education of professional ethics

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Summary

In the context of current and future challenges for all professions, a number of questions are posed using the framework of accreditation standards, to guide VSBs and VEEs as they consider these challenges for the development of an ethical professional identity through initial and continuing veterinary education.

Key words: veterinary education-professional ethics-accreditation standards

Introduction

In a present and future characterised by uncertainty, risks and complex global interconnectedness, challenges exist for the education of Professional Ethics (PE) in the veterinary profession, and for the accreditation of this education. Many of the challenges for the education of PE addressed in this paper are provocatively captured in a number of questions Richard and Daniel Susskind pose in their book *The Future of the Professions* (1). They ask: “To what problem are professions our solution?” In addition, with the development of digital technologies that can, in many instances, handle uncertainty and complexity better than human experts they ask: “To what problem is human judgement the solution?”

In this context this paper seeks to address two key questions related to the education for professional ethics in the veterinary profession. First, what does it mean to be a professional at the start of the 21st century, and what roles do ethics play in this professional identity? Second, what questions might guide Veterinary Statutory Bodies (VSBs) and Veterinary Education Establishments (VEEs) as they consider this first question, and how can accreditation standards illuminate a path to an ethical professional identity through initial and continuing veterinary education?

What is a Professional Identity, and what are Professional Ethics?

As the veterinary profession continues to ask questions such as “What is veterinary professionalism” (2,3), the veterinary and medical ethics communities increasingly reference the social sciences. Here many authors tackle this topic through the concept of “professional identity formation”, and ideas such as “socialisation to fit in” and “professional acculturation” (4,5). Such concepts amalgamate to provide the view that a professional identity is formed over time, in different contexts and settings, with reference to particular and more general knowledges and skills, behaviours and dispositions, values, beliefs and norms (5). These complexities can be illustrated in an integrity map (Figure 1). Two of the elements are considered as follows.

Market Forces

The Susskinds (1) raise the possibility of professions becoming redundant as did craft guilds of an earlier era, in a post-industrial, digital economy. As information used by experts is digitised and distributed in more ‘efficient’ ways, important questions for the professions arise such as: “who will own and control data?” and “will machines replace a number of the core competences of veterinarians?” On the other hand, can a digital algorithm be made/held responsible for the important ethical decisions that a profession will be required to continue to make? Will humanity continue to want another trusted human being to reflect on, and perhaps agonise over decisions and advice that matter to us?

State regulators

Morgan and Hanrahan debate whether an insurer’s refusal to cover lawyers where conflict of interest exists has done more to stop lawyer misbehaviour than any codes of ethics or legislation. They raise the spectre of Professional Indemnity insurers becoming the new arbiters of ethics, and, thereby become proxy gatekeepers as to who should be a ‘professional’. (6).

Figure 1: An Integrity Map of Societal Shaping of Professional Identity and Ethics *after Breakey H. & Sampford C. (7)*

Early Years	Education and Training	Entry to profession	Professional life	Integrity System Component
Free speech, social media, civil society organisations with media organisations and journalists as watchdogs				Media
Professional aspirations and ideals, community culture, stories, religion, trust and expectations				Social Values
		Economic realities: Healthy competition? Or race-to-the-bottom?		Market forces
		Corporate culture, leadership and internal integrity		Work culture
Drugs and poisons, animal welfare, Indemnity laws				State Regulators
Professional accreditation, Day One competences			Codes of conduct Definition of practice Continuing Professional Development, enforcement	Veterinary Legislation
University Culture, Integrity systems	Lecture free final year, Extramural Studies	Continuing Professional Development		Universities and Training
Veterinary Curricula, Practices and Leadership				
Impact on curricula	Mentoring	Ethical standards and policies Continuing Professional Development		Professional Organisations

Education for Professional Ethics: Applying an Accreditation Lens

Given these and other challenges I want to now consider how the profession, mostly through VSBs, ensures the ongoing trust of society in veterinarians through setting minimum standards of initial and continuing veterinary education, and enforcing standards of professional conduct and ethics. Accreditation is a key method for monitoring the development of these standards in VEEs.

In Table 1 below, column 1 lists the contracted names of the 12 Australasian Veterinary Boards Council (AVBC) standards (8). Column 2 provides a possible list of questions that could provide insight into and/or gather evidence about the PE component of a program. It should be noted that accreditation processes never assess to this level of detail, however the standards do provide a lens for viewing the means by which a veterinary program might approach education for PE.

Table 1: Accreditation Standards and Framing Questions for Education for Professional Ethics

Accreditation Standard	Framing questions
1 Organisation	Does the veterinary program have the same recognition, status and autonomy as other professional programs in the higher education institution? Are the following leaders locally registered veterinarians: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean, Head or Principal? • the staff member responsible for the professional, ethical and academic conduct of the school's clinical teaching hospital(s)? • the person with oversight of any distributed clinical education? What are the university's outcome standards for ethics in general and professional ethics for its professional programs? Is there collaboration on professional ethics with other professional programs?
2 Finances	Who pays for veterinary education? Is it the sole responsibility of the student fees through the VEE or does the profession have some responsibility to educate? What about the public who are to benefit from the expertise? How does the school manage corporate sponsorship and other potential conflicts of interest? Do program funding shortfalls lead to pressure to lower professional standards?
3 Facilities and Equipment	Are there appropriate teaching and learning spaces and equipment with appropriate student induction, empowerment and expectation for student learning?
4 Animal Resources	Is there exposure to record keeping, management of controlled drugs, ethical concepts of certification? Is the caseload sufficient to support the development of professional attributes and learning strategies to prepare graduates for entry level practice?
5 Information Resources	Does the curriculum use appropriate texts, case studies, online resources, reflection on the ethical management of information? (for example, 9,10,11)
6 Students and Learning Support	Are students able to access counselling, mentoring, the availability of wider university ethical education (formal and informal)? Do students have the ability to appropriately reflect and track their own professional identity/ ethical development? (12)
7 Admission and Progression	Are selection criteria consistent with the requirement that veterinary students meet the profession's ethical standards at the time of graduation? Are students provided accurate information as to the purposes and goals of the program and the requirements of VSBs regarding fitness to practise? Are factors other than academic performance considered for admission criteria? Are processes for dealing with student misconduct and the process for exclusion of students explicit? Is it taken into account that trait perfectionism strengthens the negative effects of moral stressors occurring in veterinary practice? (13). Are there reliable means for assessing whether a potential student has a solid background and philosophical basis for making ethical decisions?
8 Academic (faculty) and Support Staff	What is the skill set of academic (faculty) and support staff for educating students in ethics? Are most of the faculty veterinarians (who presumably have the most experience in grappling with professional ethics)? Is there support for professional development in this area? How are any conflicts between academic role and professional role managed?
9 Curriculum	Where does PE fit in the curriculum? How much formal/informal input is appropriate? At what stage does this occur? What is the most appropriate teaching/ learning methodology? How is it mapped throughout the curriculum? Who drives the PE curriculum? Do they have an appropriate background in PE? How are students inducted in to "professional" phase of the curriculum? What is the responsibility of the wider profession to mentor students and new professionals? How do students become more engaged to study PE? How is educational provision coordinated with the wider university, the community of professions, VSBs and veterinary professional organisations? How are specific competences identified? Are reflective skills and clinical experience used to teach professionalism and ethical decision making? (14,15,16)
10 Assessment	How is understanding and practical application of a Code of Ethics/ Code of Conduct tested? (17) How do you remediate when a student's understanding or conduct shows evidence of serious ethical lapses? What constitutes behaviour requiring a student's exclusion from a program? How do you track a student's progress? (18) Should a fifth level "is" be added at the apex of Miller's pyramid to assess progress toward a professional identity? (19)
11 Research Programs, Continuing and Higher Degree Education	Do students and faculty have an opportunity to apply critical and analytical thinking to veterinary professional ethics; how is research used to enrich student learning? How have the findings or new knowledge been utilized in student education, Continuing Professional Development and the Professional Development Phase? (3) How is research in PE resourced? How does the VEE support the transition from VEE to professional life? Are there opportunities for continuing professional development in professional ethics (20)?
12 Outcomes Assessment	How is information gathered on the achievement of learning outcomes relating to ethical knowledge and behaviours from the profession, VSBs and other stakeholders? How is this information used in the continuous improvement of the veterinary program?

A sense of where this discussion might progress is indicated in the following two points. In considering Standard 1, 'Organisation', for example, one might reflect on a University's ethics education in academic programs in general and professional programs specifically. The most profound impact on the culture of integrity of an organisation comes from its leadership (21). Within a VEE, it would seem self-evident that the person setting the "tone at the top" should have the ethical understanding of an experienced veterinary professional.

Likewise, for Standard 8, Academic and Support Staff, Stuart Gordon (Massey University Professional Studies Coordinator), notes a broad variety of experiences are essential to capture veterinary students' interest, and to successfully teach professionalism and ethical decision-making (22,23). That university claims that it places great emphasis on teaching personal and professional skills by experiential learning and practice in a judgement-free environment (22,24). Such approaches may combat the problem of the "hidden curriculum" where ethics is sectioned off and not applied in some areas outside of the formal ethics classes.

Professional Ethics tends to appear with related high-level outcomes in the current veterinary curricula of Australia, New Zealand, Netherlands, Thailand and South Africa that were surveyed for this paper. Lloyd & Walsh, for example, published a template for a professional development curriculum (Standard 9) in 2002 (25) Mossop and Cobb (24) argue that formal instruction on ethical decision making should be incorporated into the veterinary curriculum and that this must be assessed to ensure that student learning has occurred. Furthermore, these authors believe that relying solely on observation and role modelling to learn ethical and professional behaviour would, in itself, be inadequate (24).

Conclusion

This paper has begun to explore what it means to be a professional at the start of the 21st century, the roles that ethics play in this professional identity, and, based on this exploration, to map questions that might guide VSBs and VEEs as they consider these challenges. Accreditation standards can provide a lens on the development of an ethical professional identity through initial and continuing veterinary education.

Given the challenges that this paper has presented two questions may be posed: In developing a professional identity at this moment in the history of our profession, are we creating managerial functionaries in the service of a veterinary industry? Should we be cultivating a future practice community whose collective moral vision, character and potentially disruptive advocacy on behalf of animals, people, and ecosystems may come to subvert the very structures and processes that initially gave rise to that identity? (19) The hope is that these sorts of provocative questions, originally posed by Creuss et al. to the medical profession, might open spaces for further debates and discussions in our profession about professional identities and education for professional ethics, now and in the future.

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