

Veterinary students' perspectives on the quality of life of teaching animals used in their education

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The use of animals for the education of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine students is widely viewed as essential for the development of clinical skills and professional competence. However, the impact of animal use on the welfare and quality of life of these teaching animals is less frequently examined, and perspectives from students are unknown. Therefore, the objective of this qualitative study was to understand how veterinary students perceive the quality of life of the teaching animals used in their education. Using a semi-structured guide, we conducted focus groups (n=10) and interviews (n=2) with 4th-year veterinary students enrolled in clinical rotations (external or internal rotations) in two Canadian veterinary colleges. Responses were audio-recorded, and transcripts were analyzed using template analysis in Quirkos software. Three key themes were developed from the discussion: (1) meeting the animals' basic needs, (2) the animals' behavioural and psychological well-being, and (3) the animals' experience during teaching. The first theme represents perspectives on how veterinary colleges generally meet the animals' basic needs, including food, housing, and health management. The second theme went beyond these basic necessities and included species-appropriate environments, enrichments, and social interactions, allowing positive emotions and species-specific behaviours. The third theme captures perspectives on how the animals are used for teaching, the appropriateness of use, invasiveness of procedures, and the ethical considerations of relocating animals for teaching use. Although some students viewed teaching animals' quality of life as adequate, many other students expressed concerns over the welfare of animals used in their institutions and emphasized the room for improvement by veterinary institutions in the management, medical care, and husbandry practices. This study's findings can help inform and improve institutional policies, humane treatment of teaching animals, and promote the use and development of alternative training models to decrease unnecessary harm to teaching animals.

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