

Learning to Kill, or Learning to Heal?

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A contingent of those against the dog labs at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center protested outside UCHSC last month, waving signs that read, “Kill? Heal? What’s It Gonna Be?” and “CU Kills Dogs.” A fairly recent article in the *Colorado Daily* (“A Terminal Learning Environment,” Nov. 5, 2000) manages to move beyond the emotion and sloganeering used by these protesters to some of the real arguments of those in opposition: that the dog labs are “cruel, unnecessary and a waste of money” and that they “should be eliminated.”¹ However, the arguments used by the *Colorado Daily* (and ultimately, those in opposition) are insufficient to justify the termination of the dog labs at UCHSC. The claim that the dog labs are cruel to the animals is unsubstantiated and inaccurate. The claim that the labs are unnecessary is a falsity, as alternatives are not as beneficial as the vivisection labs. Finally, the argument that the labs are a waste of money is an ill-researched, erroneous depiction of the real circumstances.

The dog labs are held annually at the Health Sciences Center, on five consecutive Fridays in the early spring. In the lab, students insert catheters, draw blood, inject drugs, perform minor surgery, and observe the cardiovascular systems of seventy-two deeply anesthetized dogs. At the end of the lab, the dogs are euthanized. The purposes of this lab are to help teach the basic concepts of physiology, give students the opportunity to observe the effects of some commonly used drugs, and provide students with a “hands-on” experience working with live patients. Students are given the option of not

participating, but are still responsible for learning the material presented in the lab. This year, thirty students (out of one hundred and thirty-two) opted to skip the lab, which prompts the question: Why not more?

The argument used by the *Colorado Daily* that the labs are cruel to the dogs, because of the “questionable” source of the animals, is completely unsubstantiated. The *Daily* was very upset to learn that UCHSC obtains its dogs from C.C. Baird, a class-B animal dealer (one who buys dogs, rather than raising them) with a “history of violating the Animal Welfare Act.” The *Daily* states that Baird obtains his animals from “random sources,” who, in turn, are suspected of stealing people’s pets to furnish the animals to the dealer.² This argument is unfounded and not to be believed. First of all, there is absolutely no proof that UCHSC is using stolen pets in these labs. The dogs are instead purchased from vendors who are approved by the US Department of Agriculture. These approved vendors, like C.C. Baird, get the dogs from pounds and kennels, where the unwanted animals are, unfortunately, destined to be euthanized anyway. While it is correct that C.C. Baird has previously violated some aspects of the Animal Welfare Act, he has since made the necessary improvements and ultimately has been approved by the USDA. Baird would not have been approved if he truly were still violating the Animal Welfare Act, or if he were selling stolen pets.

The *Daily*’s claim that the labs are painful for the animals and that it is unjust to kill them is also incorrect, and is used simply as an emotional ploy. The idea that the labs are painful for the dogs is completely untrue. The process of anesthetizing the animals is not at all painful, and once the animals are “under,” they feel none of the procedures done to them. While there are students who claim that the dogs have woken up during the

procedures, the fact is that the dogs are still anesthetized; while they may have “woken up,” they are still under the effects of the anesthesia, and it is highly unlikely that the animals are feeling any pain. The unjustness of euthanizing the animals, however, is a more complex issue. While at first glance it may appear unkind or immoral to euthanize these animals, the dogs that are being used in the labs are destined to be euthanized anyway. This is of course unfortunate, but if they’re going to be euthanized regardless, why not have their death serve some helpful purpose, such as helping medical students to become better doctors? The fact is that there are more dogs than there are people to care for them. Utilizing these animals for the dog labs is the most practical solution to a very unfortunate situation, and is no more “cruel” than letting the dogs continue to live in overcrowded kennels and pounds until they are euthanized anyhow to make room for more unwanted animals.

The second claim made by the *Colorado Daily* is that the dog labs are unnecessary; this is a falsity, as available alternatives are not as beneficial as the labs. The first piece of evidence that the *Daily* uses to support its claim is that the other prestigious medical schools have discontinued these vivisection labs.³ While it is true that some schools have discontinued the vivisection labs, fifty-six of one hundred and twenty-six US medical schools still deem the labs necessary, and hold them annually. They, like UCHSC, take the position that the labs are currently the best option for achieving the goals of their curriculum. There are alternatives available, such as computer simulations, or observing surgeries on human patients. These options, however, do not offer students the same “hands-on” experience that they get with the vivisection labs. Course director Bruce Wallace stated that the labs provide students with an experience that cannot be

“duplicated by lectures or computer simulations or videos. There is no substitute for confronting a living organism.”⁴ Simply reading about these processes in a textbook is not enough; close observation and hands-on experience with these physiological functions are required to understand how the processes truly work. Students need to actually perform the procedures to properly learn them. At this point in time, a computer simulation cannot compare with the real experience, nor does simply observing a surgery allow students to gain the hands-on experience they need: merely observing a surgery is no better than viewing a textbook or simulation. If the students were allowed to take an active role in the surgery (obviously under very close supervision), it might provide a comparable experience. However, until that idea is much further developed, the dog labs are still the best option.

The *Daily* also believes that the labs are unnecessary because the students are supposed to be learning about human physiology and human reactions to drugs, neither of which can be achieved by the dog labs, because human and canine physiology are not identical. This argument is deceptively oversimplified and inaccurate. While it is true that canine and human physiology are not identical, the basic physiological functions observed in the labs, such as respiration and circulation, are universal enough that observing a dog’s physiological functions and reactions to certain drugs is still very beneficial, even for a student who will be working with humans. Chuck Bennett, a first-year student who participated in the lab, said, “I personally gained a lot by observing a living system. I’ve kept my ears open for better ways to do it. But after today, I think this is worthwhile for some people and you get a lot out of it....”⁵

The final claim made by the *Colorado Daily* is that the dog labs are a waste of money; this is false and poorly researched. The *Daily* is upset by how much money is being spent, and even more upset that because UCHSC is part of a state-supported school, Colorado taxpayers are “forking out tens of thousands of dollars each year to keep Baird in business.”⁶ The claims against Baird, as discussed previously, are entirely unsubstantiated, and therefore have little bearing on the present issue of money. While UCHSC is a state-supported facility, and does receive a portion of its funding from tax dollars, the regents for the University of Colorado (which includes the Health Sciences Center) are all elected officials, and therefore have every right to decide how the money from Colorado taxpayers gets “forked out.” If taxpayers truly have issues with the regents’ decisions, they should speak with their votes during the next election, as the regents were elected by “the people” to speak on behalf of “the people.” The *Colorado Daily*’s claim is also ill researched. Has the *Daily* looked into how much the labs actually cost, or how expensive ‘the alternatives might be? Currently, UCHSC spends only about twenty thousand dollars annually on the vivisection labs. This is a modest expense in proportion to all of the other segments of the curriculum. Even if UCHSC chose an alternative to the dog labs, it would most likely be of comparable expense, and quite possibly would not even be as cost-efficient as the labs themselves.

At the present time, the arguments used by the *Colorado Daily* do not justify the termination of the vivisection labs at the Health Sciences Center, as they can be refuted point by point. If at some time in the future, an alternative method that serves the purpose of teaching human physiology while providing hands-on experience for students becomes available, and proves to be better than the vivisection labs, then the issue should be

reexamined. Until then, the annual “dog labs” should continue to be a part of the curriculum at UCHSC.

Notes

1. “A Terminal Learning Environment.” *Colorado Daily*, 5 November 1999: 7.
2. “Terminal.”
3. “Terminal.”
4. Dave Curtin, “Protesters Greet Med Students: Annual CU Lab Uses Anesthetized Canines.” *Denver Post*, 11 March 2000: 1.
5. Curtin.
6. “Terminal.”

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