

Attitudes towards animals and belief in animal mind among first-year veterinary students before and after an introductory animal welfare course

JA Robbins^{*†}, JA Danielson[‡], AK Johnson[§], RL Parsons[†], MW Jorgensen^{†§} and ST Millman^{†#}

[†] Department of Veterinary Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA

[‡] Office of Academic and Student Affairs, College of Veterinary Medicine, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA

[§] Department of Animal Science, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA

[#] Department of Biomedical Sciences, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA

* Contact for correspondence: robbinsj@iastate.edu

Abstract

Veterinarians are increasingly looked to for guidance on matters relating to animal welfare, yet little is known about US veterinary students' attitudes and beliefs about animals. In 2019, we surveyed all first-year veterinary students at a major US veterinary college ($n = 123$) before and after taking a required one-credit introductory animal welfare course. Attitudes were measured using the Pests, Pets and Profit (PPP) scale and belief in animal mind (BAM) was measured using an ad hoc measure adapted from previous work. Pre- and post-course comparisons indicated the introductory animal welfare course had no immediate effect on veterinary students' attitudes or BAM. Veterinary students' attitudes were most positive for animals considered pets, followed by pests and those used for profit. Students believed most species possess a wide variety of mental capacities, including many secondary emotions often considered uniquely human (eg guilt, embarrassment, jealousy). Sociodemographic variables consistently associated with more positive attitudes towards animals were: female gender, vegetarianism and liberal political ideology. Preferring a career involving large or food animal practice was consistently associated with less positive attitudes towards animals. Belief in animal mind explained 3% of the variation in attitude scores, whereas sociodemographic variables explained 49% of variation in attitude scores. Female gender, vegetarianism and preferring small (vs large or food animal practice) were all associated with greater BAM scores. Understanding veterinary student attitudes towards animals and beliefs about the mental capacities of animals is important when evaluating a veterinarian's ability to adhere to their oath.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitude change, belief in animal mind, education, emotion, veterinary medicine