

Veterinary Ethics and human-animal relation

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I am teaching
"Ethics" to future
veterinarians.

Mandatory Ethics-Courses in the Veterinary Medicine Curriculum

(1st to 5th semester)

Applied Ethics in Veterinary Medicine I Approx. 230 students, 0,5 ECTS

Applied Ethics in Veterinary Medicine I Approx. 230 students, 0,5 ECTS

Applied Ethics in Veterinary Medicine I Approx. 230 students, 0,5 ECTS

Applied Ethics in Veterinary Medicine I Approx. 230 students, 0,5 ECTS

Animal Welfare (Ethics) Approx. 230 students, 0,5 ECTS



Christian
Dürnberger



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Further Ethics-Courses

modules or as an **elective**)

(either in specific

The Sustainability of Future Food
Production Systems

Ethics and Conservation Medicine

Research Ethics

Ethical Examinations of Current Areas
of Conflict in Veterinary Medicine

Ethics in Equine Medicine

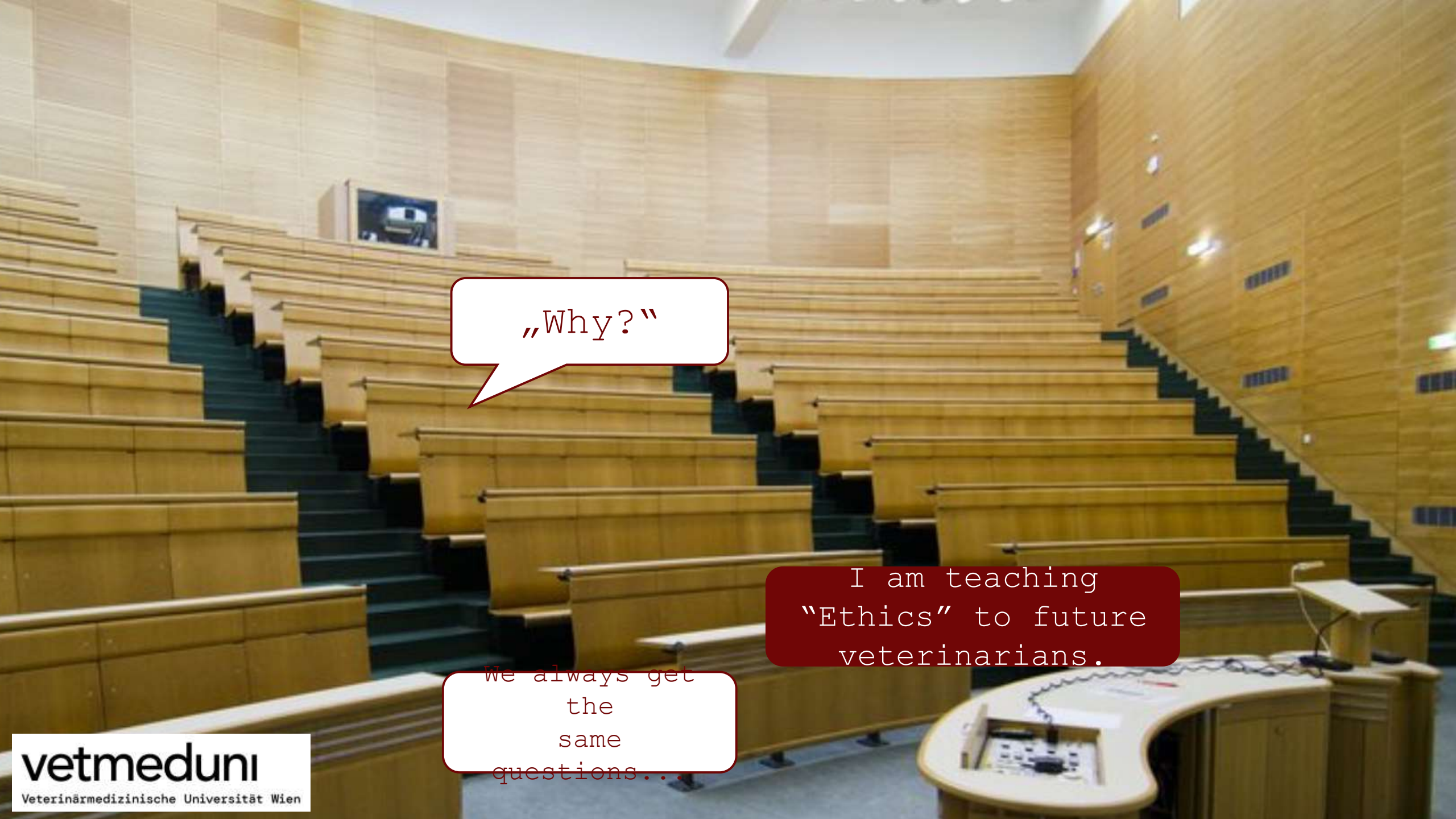
Etc.



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„Why?“

I am teaching
“Ethics” to future
veterinarians.

We always get
the
same
questions...

Why Ethics?



Aristotle
(384 – 322 B.C.)

How does the world
around us work?

How should we act?
What is morally
right?

Not the same
level of
precision,
but...

Science and
Technology

... we should
think
rationally
about both
topics.

Ethics

**Humans are beings who can—and
must—reflect on the world.**

And what does that
have to do with
veterinary
medicine?

Both aspects come
together in
veterinary medicine.

How does the world
around us work?

How should we act?
What is morally
right?

Knowledge meets
practice/decisions.

In other words...



Society (and the
profession
itself) expects
good
veterinarians to
provide not only
medical
expertise...

... but also **ethical**
guidance.

A wide-angle photograph of a large, empty lecture hall. The seating consists of many rows of light-colored wooden benches, arranged in a tiered fashion that follows the curve of the room. The walls are also made of light-colored wood panels, creating a warm, acoustic environment. In the foreground, a curved wooden desk or podium is visible, equipped with a microphone and some electronic equipment. The overall atmosphere is quiet and professional.

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"Ethics" to future
veterinarians.

We always get
the
same
questions...



"Ethics? Do we need to memorize that for the test?"

No! We understand 'ethics' as a means of promoting independent reflection and as a space for discussions on questions that are crucial, yet not strictly medical.



"Ethics? Do you tell us what is morally right?"

No. We don't take the approach of *normative* ethics, which says, 'This is right! That is wrong!'

We follow an approach based on **empirical** ethics, which describes and clarifies moral positions and controversies.

6 assumptions

on ethics and veterinary
medicine

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

We have no social
consensus on the
*crucial question** of
animal ethics.



* From a moral
point of view,
how should we
treat animals?

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Österreich-Chronik Wien Welt-Chronik Gesellschaft Tiere Umwelt Wetter

Verstopfung: Goldfisch in England für 380 Euro operiert

3. Jänner 2015, 09:17



vergrößern (800x543)
foto: dpa/irs

"Jeder fühlt sich für seine Liebsten verantwortlich" - auch für den Goldfisch.

Zur Betäubung wurden Anästhesie-Gase ins Wasser geleitet

London - Ein Engländer hat seinen unter lebensbedrohender Verstopfung leidenden Goldfisch für umgerechnet 380 Euro operieren lassen. Die Tierärztin Faye Bethell habe fast eine Stunde für den Eingriff benötigt, berichteten britische Medien am Freitag. Zwei Tierarzthelferinnen seien ihr dabei zur Hand gegangen.

Zur Betäubung des nur sieben Zentimeter langen Fisches seien Anästhesie-Gase in das Wasser geleitet worden. "Letztlich sind es alles Haustiere und jeder fühlt sich für seine Liebsten verantwortlich", sagte die Ärztin im ostenglischen Ort North Walsham der BBC (APA/dpam 3.1.2015)

But there are also pet owners who want to have their animal euthanized...

... because they are going on vacation.

... because treatment is too expensive.

Newspaper article:
"Goldfish underwent surgery to treat constipation."

So, we have pet owners who would do virtually anything for their animals.

Austrian influencer:
"Not being vegan is not
okay."



German Butcher Shop:
"Yes, a pig had to die for
this ham."



”

“The slaughterhouse internship was the first time I truly confronted the ethical side of this topic, and I became vegan a few weeks later.”

“It was much less difficult than I expected, and I could easily see myself working at the slaughterhouse once a week.”

Two exemplary responses from students at
the University of Veterinary Medicine
Vienna as part of a study on the
slaughterhouse internship

We have no social
consensus on the
crucial question of
animal ethics.

The more intense and
emotional the
controversies...

... the more important
your **own moral compass**
becomes.

**Veterinary ethics begins with
reflecting on my own values and
attitudes as a veterinarian.**

We have no social
consensus on the
crucial question of
animal ethics.

Where, on the
other hand, there
is something
resembling
"consensus" is on
the following...



(Almost) everyone considers
themselves an expert when
it comes to animals.

Study

Farmers

Cows are
relaxing

Picture of cows
lying down in a
stable

Citizens

Are the cows
sick? I think
they are
sick. Why
else would
they be lying
down?

Question: How are the cows in this picture doing?

Question: What are the pigs doing?

„They play, they
keep themselves
busy“



Only 30%
give the
correct
answer

Conclusion

Animals appeal to
our immediate
emotions...

... but *expertise* is
needed to
correctly assess
their well-being.

Conclusion

To put it
bluntly:

Veterinarians are experts in animal
welfare...

... in a society where
virtually everyone believes
they are experts on animals.

Ethical responsibility of veterinarians
includes to confidently represent their
own expertise and to actively
participate in public debates on the
relationship between humans and animals.



Ethics should not just be the
theoretical reflection on what
would be morally right...

... but also “looking at” what
people actually experience in
practice.

Example

Euthanasia

Often described in the literature as a “moral stressor” for veterinarians.

And that may be the case, but:

When veterinarians are asked openly in an interview-survey about their experiences with euthanasia, they also talk at length about their **“most beautiful experiences.”**

”

“I am also very grateful when I am allowed to perform euthanasia.”

“Well, for me, that's not something that would break me at all....”

A good euthanasia is also “a celebration (...), so it should also be solemn, it should also be a climax.”

”

“We euthanized the cat in the garden. Not only was the cat's owner there, but her parents and the neighbors who had always looked after the cat came too. And I had the feeling that these people were letting this cat go with love. Of course it was sad and everyone cried, but for me there was something... yes, something beautiful (...) I keep thinking about it, for me it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever experienced.”

What do these exemplary quotes
show?

Two things

(1) Ethical reflections often
focus on moral problems and
burdens...

... however, we should not
forget the "moral success
stories" from which
veterinarians can draw
strength.

(2) An empirically based ethics
that surveys and examines the
diverse moral dimensions of the
reality of work...

... makes a valuable and
necessary contribution to
veterinary ethics.

Since 2025:
Professorship „Empirical Veterinary
Ethics“



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What do veterinarians
describe as burdensome?

Which work situations
still occupy their
thoughts after work?



The burdens of
veterinary medicine
have comparatively
little to do with the
patients.

Troublesome situations

Which work situations still stress you out during your
personal time?

”

When “suddenly the 6-foot-tall
man (...) is sitting there
crying, then you take some of
that worry and sadness with you
(...) into your private life.”

For example, when a animal owner
talks about “the death of her
son.”

Troublesome situations

Which work situations still stress you out during your personal time?

”

During home visits, you see “... really sad things sometimes, where you can just see that they are living on the breadline, there's nothing in the fridge. There's really nothing in the fridge, and then they have a sick animal. And what can you do? [...] Or an 80-year-old grandmother who has a cat that is 20. She's only still on this planet because this cat is still there. But the cat is terribly ill and no one cares about the grandmother. [...] The water has been turned off and the electricity has already been cut off, and it's just terribly sad. Of course, you take that home with you and think to yourself, 'My God, how awful.'”

Stress and challenges often arise less from working with the patients themselves and more from situations with the animal owners.

And that's challenging.

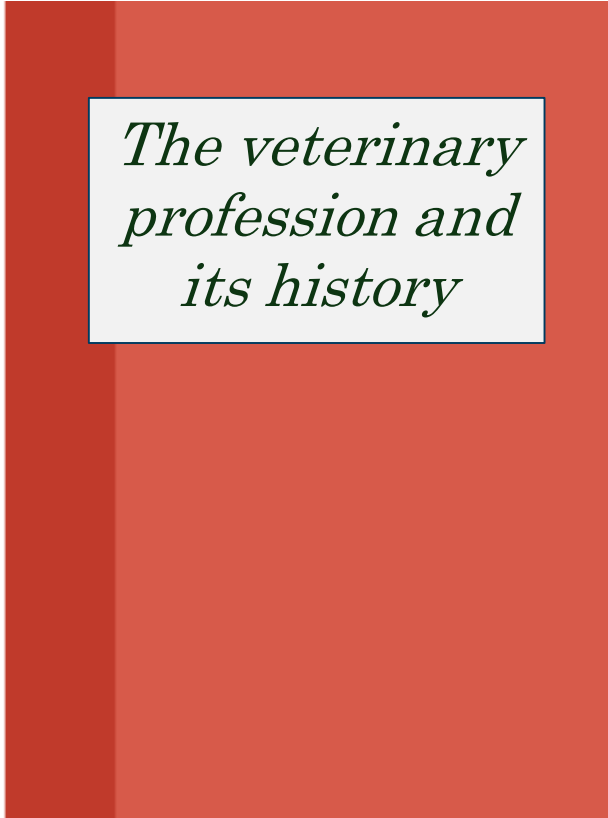
"I studied veterinary medicine because I didn't want to deal with people... that was the biggest error of my professional life."

Any veterinary ethics must prepare students for the following: Veterinary medicine always involves/deals with people—this is part of the DNA of the profession.

*That has always been the case,
by the way...*

Any veterinary ethics must prepare students for the following: Veterinary medicine always involves/deals with people—this is part of the DNA of the profession.

veterinarian
Theodor Kitt
writes...



*The veterinary
profession and
its history*

veterinarian Theodor Kitt writes...

The veterinary profession and its history

"With people from all walks of life, from the poorest to the richest, from the roughest farmhand to the most educated and highly placed man, from the cowgirl to the well-educated housewife and further up to the romantic, fantastic, hysterical benefactor of her lapdog, who entrusts her darling only to the well-groomed, well-perfumed doctor, **the veterinarian has to deal with them all.**"



Ethical considerations can
function as a constitutive
starting point for discussions
within the profession.

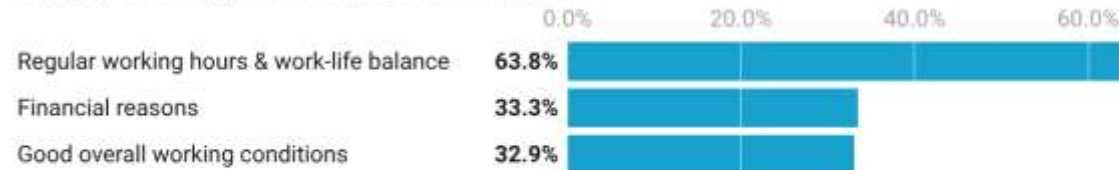
Example: Study involving official veterinarians
in
Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Motives of Official Veterinarians

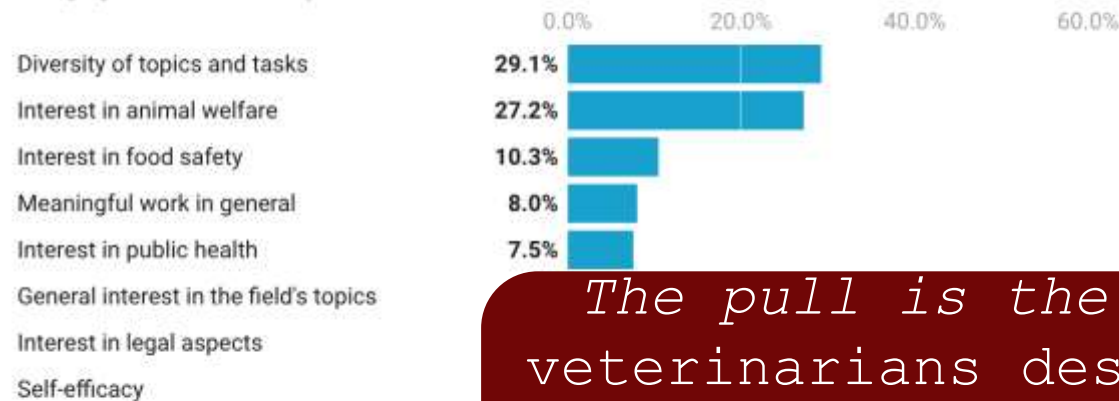
Motivations for choosing a career as an official veterinarian

Open-ended question, N = 213

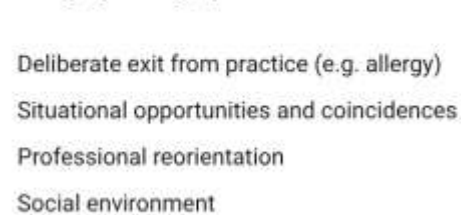
Category 1: Working Conditions & Structural Factors



Category 2: Professional Topics & Values



Category 3: Biographical Factors

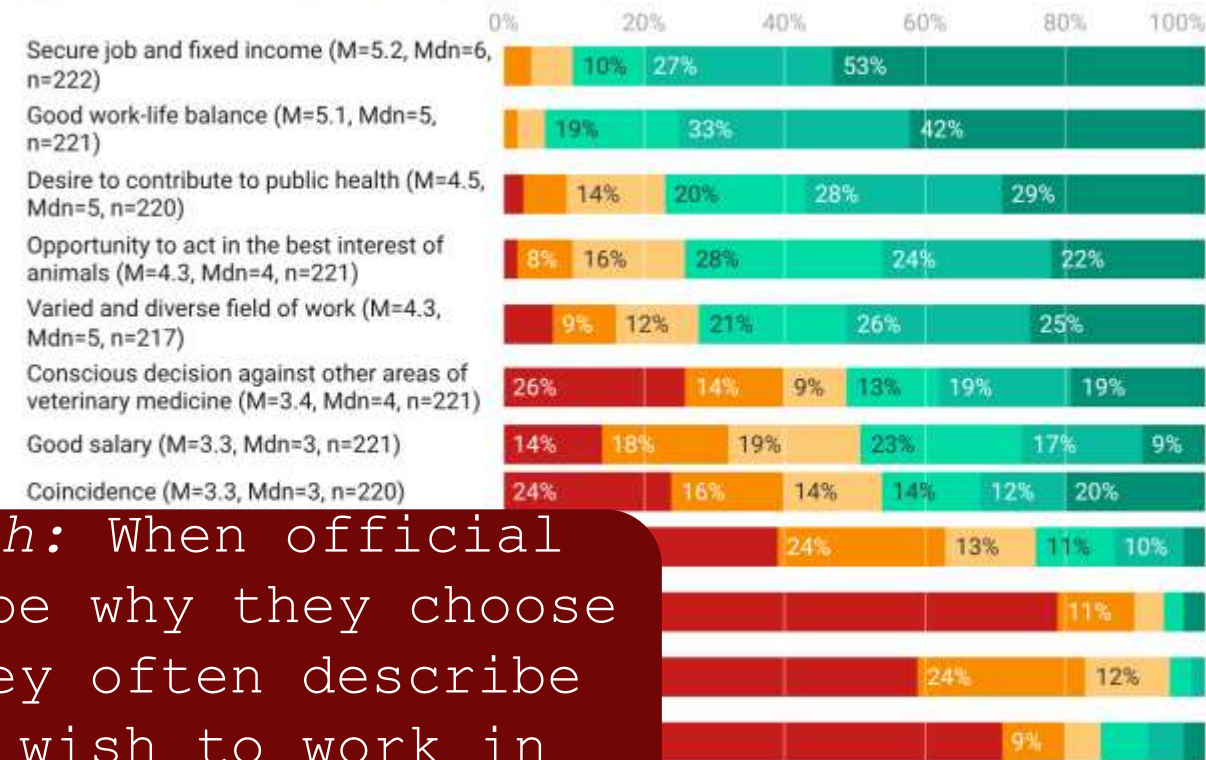


Created with Datawrapper

Motivations for choosing a career as an official veterinarian

Degree of agreement or disagreement with specific statements (ranked by mean score M).

1 - Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5 6 - Strongly agree



Values in %; due to rounding, sums per row may deviate slightly from 100%.

Created with Datawrapper

The pull is the push: When official veterinarians describe why they choose this profession, they often describe why they no longer wish to work in other veterinary sectors.

Moral challenges of Official Veterinarians

1 Ethical Dilemma (A)	DESCRIPTION OF MORAL DISTRESS The official veterinarian enforces animal protection and simultaneously inflicts harm on humans for whom they feel compassion. EXAMPLE  Animal seizure during an owner's psychosocial crisis, exacerbating human suffering.	RESOLUTION / COPING STRATEGY No flawless moral solution possible; the conflict is endured, ensuring sensitivity in implementation.
	DESCRIPTION OF MORAL DISTRESS	RESOLUTION /

"In typical morally challenging situations..."

Degree of agreement or disagreement with specific statements (ranked by mean score M).

■ 1 - Strongly disagree
 ■ 2
 ■ 3
 ■ 4
 ■ 5
 ■ 6 - Strongly agree



	 An animal welfare complaint is postponed for a seemingly more severe case, even though every violation involves suffering.	
4 Legal-Moral Divergence	DESCRIPTION OF MORAL DISTRESS The official veterinarian must legally enforce regulations that contradict their own moral convictions. EXAMPLE  Legally approving tethering systems or long-distance transports to third countries, despite finding them morally unacceptable.	RESOLUTION / COPING STRATEGY Enduring the moral distress, avoiding highly conflicted tasks when possible, striving for longterm statutory reforms.

"In typical morally challenging situations..."

Degree of agreement or disagreement with specific statements (ranked by mean score M).

1 - Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5 6 - Strongly agree



How would you interpret the fact that this type of conflict poses the greatest moral challenge for official veterinarians? What conclusion would you draw from this?

The idealistic perspective views veterinarians as the spearhead of animal welfare, suffering because legally permitted standards lag behind new ethical beliefs regarding animals.

Laws need to be changed.

The provocative interpretation argues that professionals enter the field with false expectations, misjudging the tasks within existing structures beforehand.

The applicant pool needs to change.



In order to perform well as a
veterinarian in the long term
and remain satisfied in the job,
many skills are required...

... one skill seems to
be underestimated in
this regard.



"There are some owners who completely drain you [...] And I don't let that happen to me anymore. When I was young, I used to take every problem someone else had home with me [...], and it's very, very easy to get burned out very, very quickly that way."

"So I maintain distance [from the cases and animal owners] for my own peace of mind, as best I can."

"Then, of course, you also need a certain amount of self-care, where you say to yourself, I'm accompanying these animals, I'm accompanying the people who belong to them, which is sometimes almost the more difficult task, without overexploiting my own emotions in the process."

Being a veterinarian also
means, and very
importantly...

... being able to set
boundaries.

Emotionally

You don't let
everything get
to you.

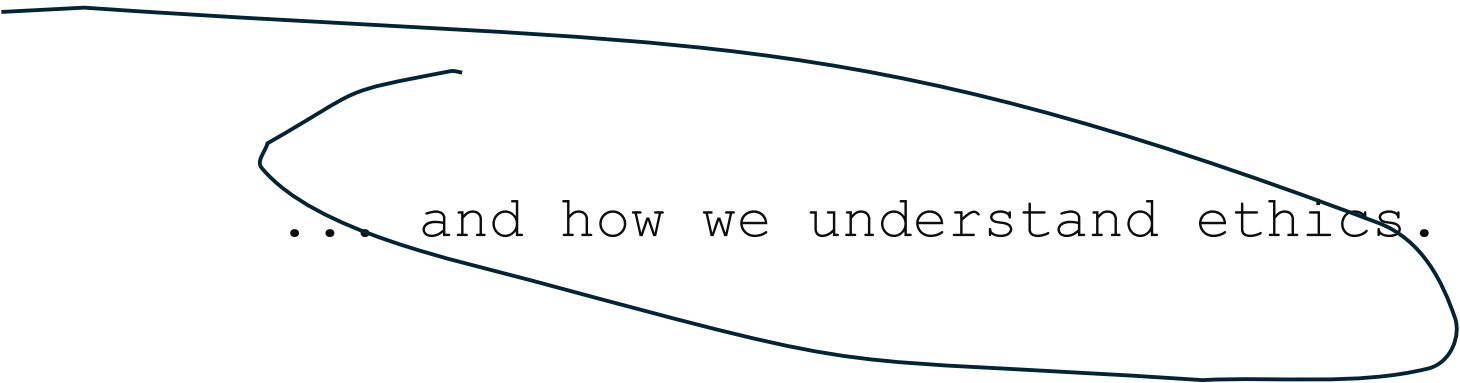
Morally

It takes an inner
moral compass,

but at the same
time, you mustn't
despair if the goals
you set yourself
cannot always be

**"Pragmatic
idealism"**

I hope it has become clear why “ethics
in veterinary medicine” can be necessary
and helpful.



... and how we understand ethics.

Why (Empirical) Veterinary Ethics

It's about the
desire to better
understand the
world around us.

Research

**part of the
profession:** The
findings better
prepare students
for their future

Teaching

Improving any
situation requires
a prior
understanding of
the actual
challenges
involved

Third
mission

For one last thought...

... we return to the lecture hall.

A wide-angle photograph of a large, empty lecture hall. The seating consists of numerous rows of light-colored wooden benches, arranged in a tiered fashion that follows the curve of the room. The walls are also made of light-colored wood panels, creating a warm, acoustic environment. In the foreground, a curved wooden desk or podium is visible, equipped with a microphone and some electronic equipment. The overall atmosphere is quiet and formal.

"Ethics? Do you tell us what is morally right?"

When we hear the word
“ethics,” we often think of
categorical rules.

“That's right! You
absolutely have to do
that!”

“That's wrong!
You mustn't do
that!”



Aristotle

had a different approach to
ethics.

There are no simple guidelines for ethical issues because the situations are far too complex and context-dependent.

Ethics is the honest consideration of what is morally right.

And then the attempt to act accordingly.

Sometimes it works better, sometimes less so.

But you keep trying again and again.

This ethical approach is more down-to-earth and well-suited for a profession that has to make complex decisions every day.

I hope it has become clear why “ethics
in veterinary medicine” can be necessary
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... and how we understand ethics.

Interested in
projects and
publications?

Let's get in
contact



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Thank you for your
attention!

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"I am a veterinarian,
but..."

But?

“Create a picture of a veterinarian”



Associations related to “veterinarian”...

... are relatively clear-cut and strongly focused on small animal practice and, to a lesser extent, on livestock practice.

But veterinary medicine is a **“fragmented profession”** that operates in many different fields.

Example?

... plays a central role in ensuring food safety and animal welfare within **slaughterhouses**, yet...

... the profession 'veterinarian' is usually associated with other contexts; in fact, many people don't even know that vets work in slaughterhouses.

... even though most people eat meat every day, they usually prefer not to know/see how it is produced.

... the field of slaughterhouse veterinary work remains largely unexplored.

Against this backdrop we started a project...

Stigmatization of a Profession?

An Empirically Informed Ethical Analyses
of Veterinary Work in Slaughterhouses

Research Project

Field: (Empirical) Veterinary Ethics

Funded by: FWF (P 36759-G)

Duration: Nov. 23 – Oct. 27



... or how we feature it on our scientific
poster...

Stigmatization of a Profession?

An Empirically Informed Ethical Analyses
of Veterinary Work in Slaughterhouses



Christian Dürnberger
(PI)

THIS COULD
BE
A PICTURE...

... but most people would prefer not
to see it.



Johanna Karg
(PhD)

The Stigmatized Veterinarian?



Veterinarians at the
slaughterhouse

"... I experienced that a lot when I was younger, [laughs] when you talk to a woman somewhere, doesn't matter where, get to know a woman or something, ... and then at some point it comes up, you get asked what you do for a living. And you say 'veterinarian'. You can notice the little hearts appearing in their eyes—which is a great advantage when picking someone up, sure [laughs]—but when you follow that up with 'I work at a slaughterhouse', that world pretty much collapses again, yeah, [laughs]."

”

The Stigmatized Veterinarian?

To the other veterinarians, we're just "the dregs of veterinary medicine."

”



Veterinarians at the
slaughterhouse

Project focuses on...

... challenges, motives, professional identity and potential experiences of stigmatization of veterinarians at slaughterhouses.

First publications are out, with more on the way

Dürnberger, Christian (2026): Landwirtschaft als „Drecksarbeit“? Nutztierhaltung zwischen Unsittlichkeit und Unschicklichkeit in einer ultra-zivilisierten Gesellschaft. In: Ermann, Ulrich; Langthaler, Ernst; Penker, Marianne und Schermer, Markus (Hrsg.): Nahrungswelten transformieren. Nomos. ISBN 978-3-7560-3350-8. 113-136.

Dürnberger, C.; Karg, J. (2025): Das berufliche Ansehen der Veterinärmedizin. Überlegungen zum Prestige einer Profession und seiner Ambivalenz. In: Wiener Tierärztliche Monatsschrift. Band 112. https://www.wtm.at/smart_users/uni/user94/explorer/43/wtm000045.pdf

Veterinarians on the margins? A qualitative interview study on the professional identity of official veterinary inspectors working in slaughterhouses in Austria.

Johanna Karg^{1*}, Sabine Salloch² and Christian Dürnberger¹

The Slaughterhouse as Veterinary Workplace.

A spatial-theoretical analysis based on qualitative interviews with Austrian official veterinary inspectors.

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References

Dürnberger, C.; Springer, S. (2025): 'I'm not just a vet, I'm also a human.' A qualitative interview study on boundary management between work and private life among small animal veterinarians. PLOS One. 20(5):e0322938.

Springer, S; Axiak Flammer, S; Dürnberger, C (2024): "Veterinary medicine is not finished when I have diagnosed an incurable disease, that's when it starts for me." A qualitative interview study with small animal veterinarians on hospice and palliative care. Front Vet Sci. 2024; 11:1440404.

Dürnberger, C (2020): I would like to, but I can't. An online survey on the moral challenges of German farm veterinarians. In: Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics.

Dürnberger, C (2020): Am I actually a veterinarian or an economist? Understanding the moral challenges for farm veterinarians in Germany on the basis of a qualitative