Occlusion of Vision in Old English Sheepdogs

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Some Rights for Animal Therapists: Better Science and Better Welfare

Dana H. Murphy

"Animal-facilitated therapy." The phrase has a nice, solid ring to it, doesn’t it? And it also sounds like an idea that nearly everyone could agree to endorse, like democracy and vacations. But a closer scrutiny of some of the available literature on the use of animals as adjuncts in situations there are a number of deficiencies. While there is nearly everyone could agree to endorse, “no therapists themselves. The scientific rigor necessary to arrive at a judgment on the effectiveness of animals in therapy is relatively easy to achieve, with a little thought. A far more difficult issue is how an animal being employed as a therapist ought to be treated, especially in light of the incredible range of conditions and environments that animals will probably be working in at some time in the near future.

As Michael Fox noted in the last issue of the Journal (34:267, 1982), our choice of language about animals both reflects and conditions the ways we think about them. He discussed our desensitization to the plight of confinement farm animals through use of the phrase “production units,” and of lab animals by the impersonal term “specimens.” It is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the same insensitivity to animals’ needs emerges from the literature on animal-facilitated therapy. A paper by Leo Bustad and Linda Hines (Cal Vet 36(8):37-44, in particular, speaks of companion animals as “prescription pets,” and then cites another article by Samuel and Elizabeth Corson in which animals are reduced to the psychobabble of “bonding catalysts.” Pets, claim Bustad and Hines, can provide the elderly with someone to “lord it over.” McCulloch views visiting companion animals as “entertainers” for those who are forced to waste away their hours in places like hospitals.

It does seem, then, that some of the aspects of animal-facilitated therapy need a bit of careful reconsideration before we begin to gush euphorically over its potential. First, we need better-controlled studies on the outcomes of treatments that employ animals. Next, we need some reasonably specific guidelines on the care and welfare of the animals used. At a minimum, we can say that these animals should never be treated as “living library books,” rented out on a short-term basis in a way that is probably confusing to the animals, to people who may mistreat them or, perhaps worse, may come to love their animal-guests too much, only to lose them at the end of an evening. And finally, we had best take a closer look at a society that exiles itself and people to human warehouses, where they are left to exist without activity or purpose, so that animals, once again, are compelled to assume the tasks that we would simply prefer to avoid.

Occlusion of Vision in Old English Sheepdogs

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The show standards established for many breeds of dogs have been linked with a number of genetically related abnormalities that can result in unnecessary suffering. The facial skin folds and shortened face of bulldogs, which respectively lead to chronic dermatitis and respiratory difficulties, are two dramatic examples. Likewise, ear-cropping is an ethically questionable mutilation that conveys no benefit upon the dog. Another serious welfare concern relates to a practice that is common among owners of Old English sheepdogs and other breeds with long facial hair: allowing the hair to cover the animal’s eyes. This feature is considered desirable by the widespread belief...
that it is necessary to keep the hair over the dog's eyes in order to protect them from sunlight. In fact, when the hair is lifted up to expose the eyes to daylight, a photophobic reaction (blinking, lacrimation, etc.) does occur, which leads the owner to the erroneous conclusion that the eyes actually need to be left covered. However, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that an animal whose eyes are almost totally obscured from any contact with sunlight, in turn, will show photophobia when the eyes are exposed. This is no reason for keeping an animal's eyes permanently covered. Furthermore, the eyes, since they are continually being irritated by hair, are likely to develop chronic conjunctivitis, which may in turn lead to corneal ulceration and other ophthalmic problems.

Many owners of Old English sheepdogs and other breeds with long facial hair believe that, since the hair covers the dog's eyes, it must be "natural" or serve some beneficial purpose that was deliberately introduced as a trait through selective breeding. Such myths need to be dispelled for the health and welfare of these breeds. Instead, owners are advised to either trim the hair away from their dog's eyes or tie it up on top of the animal's head with a ribbon or elastic band.

Dogs entered in shows with facial hair deliberately groomed over the eyes should be excluded from competition, since this show standard, in and out of the ring, places the animal's welfare in jeopardy. There is also evidence of dramatic temperament changes in sheeptdogs whose visual occlusion has been corrected by cutting the hair away from their eyes; shy, timid, and unpredictable dogs suddenly become tractable, responsive and, emotionally stable companions. Little wonder.

Preliminary Verdict for Electro-Immobilization

What a electronic immobilizer does is easy to see—afer electric current from the device is passed through an animal's body, the animal is "locked" into immobility, and procedures such as branding can be performed with a minimum of hassle. But how it works, and whether pain is partially or completely blocked by the procedure, are great deal harder to figure out. The manufacturers of one such device, the Feenix Stockstill, claim that pain is indeed blocked during the duration of immobility. But the Scientific Advisory Panel of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, in a memo dated September 22, 1982, voiced some skepticism about the effectiveness of these devices. Specifically, they wanted to know whether the equipment:

1. Is safe for subject and operator.
2. Induces anesthesia (or analgesia), or merely a state of immobility that prevents the animal from displaying typical signs of pain.
3. Should be restricted to qualified persons, or could be used by laymen safely and humanely.

In response to a letter from Michael Fox which, among other items, raised these questions, James F. Amend, D.V.M, Ph.D. (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) summarized his recent results with the Vet-Master animal immobilizer. That response is reproduced here.

I am pleased to respond to your inquiry concerning the Vet-Master animal immobilizer, currently produced by Ag-Tronic, Inc., of Hastings, NE. My laboratory has been engaged for a period of time in the investigation of physiological and clinical effects of this device as it is applied in management procedures for beef calves.

As you may be aware, use of electric currents for manipulating muscles, reducing pain sensations, producing therapeutic sleep, or providing general surgical anesthesia has been studied in many species of animals, and in man, since the pioneering work of LeDuc in 1962. Numerous research reports presented over the past 80 years have produced two critical concerns in relation to design of this type of device. First, one must choose with great care the manner of electrical contact between device and subject, and second, one must determine very precisely the properties of the electric current applied. Our studies with the beef calves have addressed these two concerns as we have participated in evaluation of the Vet-Master animal immobilizer.

With regard to the manner of electrical contact between device and subject, earlier investigators thought it was essential to deliver electrical current directly into body fluids, thereby providing a low-resistance path for the current, avoiding electrical burns of the skin and delivering an adequate amount of electrical energy to the subject. In development of the Vet-Master, which makes electrical contact with the animal in the relatively uncontaminated regions of mouth and anus, we were concerned that penetration of the skin with any type of needle to reach the body fluids would create risk of infection, as well as cause pain upon application of the contacts. We therefore developed nontraumatic rectal probes and lip contacts, which deliver current to the body fluids by way of the moist rectal surface, and saliva within the mouth, respectively. These contacts have proved to be excellent low-resistance routes through which electric current can be delivered. No tissue trauma has been observed at these sites in any animal we have immobilized with the Vet-Master. Absence of pain upon attachment reduces the need for initial physical restraint as well.