

# Justice, rights, and unnecessary suffering

As physicians, we need to expand our circle of moral concern to include all people as well as animals we use for food, and to provide them some degree of political and legal standing.

Jan Hajek, MD

Ten years ago, I sat at a global health conference luncheon with an inspirational physician-leader and human rights champion. As they talked about the need for physicians to recognize and call out systemic injustice in the world, they chose the mayonnaise and ham sandwiches from the selection of food on offer. That struck me as odd and inconsistent.

I often think about that encounter. I admire that physician. What they were saying about human rights, principles of equity, and how we need to be careful to not overlook systemic injustices, especially those that may benefit us personally, was impactful. What also stood out was how we could then shrug off the plight of nonhuman animals as an entirely separate issue, one not worthy of serious consideration or attention.

The majority of physicians are advocates for human rights and take social justice issues seriously. Over 100 years ago, Dr Rudolf Virchow famously stated that “physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and social problems fall to a large extent within their jurisdiction.” Our concern for people faced with unjust oppression or systemic violence should naturally extend to nonhuman animals. In fact, there are

synergies, and there is evidence that caring about animals and promoting animal rights can actually help promote human rights, equity, and social justice.<sup>1</sup>

Most physicians in Canada enjoy consuming meat, eggs, and milk products. These foods are an important part of many of our daily routines and may have been part of our families’ traditions and cultural identities for centuries. But, over the years, our uses of animals, our scientific understanding of animals’ cognitive and emotional capacities, and our knowledge of nutrition have evolved. This presents challenges we need to grapple with. Difficult social changes may be needed, and some aspects of our daily routines and traditions may need to be adjusted.

We shudder to think of the philosopher René Descartes theorizing that animals are just like machines, calmly nailing a dog’s feet to a board and dissecting them alive while they only *appeared* to be in pain.<sup>2</sup> We now cringe at the thought of someone being so callous. But while we would rightfully prosecute someone who mistreated a dog, we have normalized and justified relatively brutal industrial farming practices, which are generally exempt from current anticruelty laws.<sup>3</sup>

Most pigs and cows raised for food are subject to unnecessary suffering and have objectively miserable lives. On farms across Canada, castrating and hot iron branding a young cow without any pain control is still an acceptable practice.<sup>4</sup> Female pigs can be kept in small crates most of their adult

lives.<sup>5</sup> Most dairy cows live in stalls, are repeatedly impregnated, and have their calves taken away soon after birth to maximize the amount of milk extracted by milking machines.<sup>6</sup>

Our choices are not questions of necessity. There are alternative farming practices available. Nutritional science has even established that humans can thrive on well-planned plant-based diets.<sup>7</sup> Yes, there are people in the world who still depend on raising animals like cows for their sustenance. There are also people who currently depend on the trade of endangered wild animals for their livelihood. We need to consider people’s individual situations and provide additional support to allow them to transition to safer and more compassionate livelihoods. But that is not the case for those of us living and working as physicians in Canada. Most of us do not eat meat or drink milk because of necessity.

Indigenous people’s leadership is crucial to protecting our planet. According to Judy Wilson, former Kúkpi7 (Chief) of the Neskonlith Indian Band, “Indigenous Peoples rely on hunting, fishing, and traditional foods and hold respect for the animals and all they harvest. Indigenous Peoples’ teachings are based on understandings that animals are our relatives and we are all connected. Large scale, industrialized animal farming and slaughterhouses are not the future for humanity as they are not sustainable and are inhumane to the animals whether they are for food sources or hides

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or the fur pelts” (J. Wilson, electronic communication, 21 April 2023).

There is room for different ethical views concerning the treatment of animals. However, these views must take into consideration the facts, and the facts are that domesticated animals like pigs and cows have complex cognitive and emotional lives, can establish sociable relations with humans, and objectively suffer on most farms when raised for food, and there are alternative farming practices and foods readily available.

As physicians, our promotion of human rights over the past several decades has been revolutionary and has meaningfully moved toward delegitimizing unjust structural hierarchies based on race, religion, and gender. However, insofar as these rights have sometimes been defined in stark contrast to animals (e.g., don't treat them like animals) there have been mixed consequences. Defining human rights based on a strict animal-human divide may lead to the unjust disregard of the rights and interests of animals. In contrast, acknowledging that animals are similar to humans (versus humans as similar to animals or superior to animals) could lead to less prejudicial attitudes toward other people.<sup>1</sup>

As physicians, we need to expand our circle of moral concern to include not only all people, but also animals we use for food, like pigs and cows. And not only moral concern; we also need to provide some degree of political and legal standing. Notably, the US military no longer recognizes military working dogs as equipment, but more as personnel, which grants them some protections from abuse and slaughter when they are older and need to retire.<sup>8</sup> Other animals could also be granted the right not to be treated as mere property.

Given pandemic risks and environmental impacts of animal agriculture, the issues of justice and rights for animals can also be framed as a matter of self-interest.<sup>9</sup> Being compassionate and taking the welfare and interests of animals seriously will ultimately help us as well. It is also

entirely reasonable for physicians to advocate against the unnecessary suffering of animals on the basis of their individual rights and interests, along the lines of physicians advocating against the abuse of people on the basis of their individual rights and interests. These considerations can be manifest in some of our daily decisions and food choices. ■

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retire my pager this year. Although I still juggle 3 call schedules and am on call on average 4 times a month, my cellphone has made my pager obsolete. The pager has been useful when on call and in an area of poor cell reception, but its retirement is long overdue.

From a work perspective, I am at the same stage now as I was when I wrote that editorial in 2012, although arguably I may be further away from retirement now! However, from a personal perspective, I am far happier in my life. ■

—David B. Chapman, MBChB

#### Correction

While proofreading this article, we made two edits that undermined a point Dr Hajek was trying to make. The original sentence, with edits marked, is: “We shudder to think of the philosopher René Descartes theorizing that animals are just like machines, calmly nailing a dog’s feet to a board and dissecting **them it** alive while **they it** only appeared to be in pain.”

Not changing an author’s meaning is editors’ “first, do no harm,” so we sincerely apologize to Dr Hajek for this error; in attempting to clarify what is the object of the action, we reversed Dr Hajek’s very intentional word choice (that is, using “they” instead of “it”). This online version of the article, as well as the accompanying PDF, has been restored to the original wording.



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