

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Preparing Veterinary Technicians for Ethical Decision-Making

Lessons from the lived experience of LVTs

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FROM THE LITERATURE

Common Ethical Challenges in Practice

01

Patient Welfare vs. Client Wishes

Balancing the animal's best medical interests against the owner's decisions and financial constraints.

Kramper (2023); Quain et al. (2021)

02

Resource Limitations

Navigating care quality when equipment, staffing, or funding are insufficient to meet patient needs.

Van Hooser et al. (2021); Cetrano et al. (2017)

03

Euthanasia Decisions

Managing the emotional and ethical tensions around end-of-life decisions and owner-requested euthanasia.

Kramper (2023); Quain et al. (2021)

04

Confidentiality & Reporting

Determining when a duty to report abuse or neglect overrides client confidentiality obligations.

Kramper (2023); AVMA/NAVTA professional ethics guidance

CHECK-IN

Quick Poll

Raise your hand (and keep it up as long as it applies to you).

- You currently teach ethics in your program
- Ethics is integrated throughout the curriculum
- Ethics is its own dedicated course
- Graduates have told you they felt prepared for real practice

YES

NO

Now let's consider: What does this tell us about the way ethics is taught and experienced in veterinary technician education?



THE STATE OF THE FIELD

Ethics Education Among Vet Technicians

42.3%

received at least one hour of ethics education in their program.

32.4%

were unsure whether ethics had ever been taught.

25.2%

reported receiving no ethics education at all.

Source: Kramper (2023)

The Research Question

How do veterinary technicians experience ethical decision-making after graduation?

Specifically:



What prepared them?



What didn't?



How did they learn ethics?



What should schools change?

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SHARED

“

I felt well prepared
technically — but not
emotionally.



Overly focused on technical
skills



Little ethics instruction



Almost no emotional
preparation



WHAT THE INTERVIEWS SURFACED

Common Ethical Challenges

01

Financial Limitations

Limited resources and budget constraints create difficult decisions about the level and quality of care that can be provided.

02

Euthanasia

Navigating end-of-life decisions and the ethical, legal, and emotional complexities of euthanasia came up repeatedly.

03

Hierarchy & Questionable Care

Inability to influence decisions due to organizational hierarchy, and distress from witnessing care below ethical standards.

Cycle of Ethical Distress in Veterinary Technicians





PROTECTIVE FACTORS

What Helped



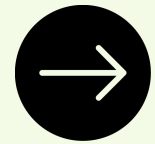
Mentorship & Reflective Discussion

Meaningful mentorship and chances for reflective discussion were consistently named as key to professional growth.



Continuing Education & EI

Ongoing learning and the development of emotional intelligence were strong contributors to ethical practice.



Supportive Workplaces

A nurturing work environment was critical — notably, formal classroom ethics training (as it stands currently) was not a significant factor.

THE GAP PARTICIPANTS NAMED

What Was Missing

Feedback showed a clear gap between theory and practice. Training focused too much on definitions — and not enough on hands-on, real-world application. Participants wanted more:



More realistic scenarios



Role-play activities



Communication practice



Conflict management

Navigating Moral Distress & Compassion Fatigue

THE CASE

During a spay on a pregnant dog with a severe orthopedic injury, the veterinarian decides not to administer additional pain medication out of concern for the fetuses. As the student technician, they believe the dog is experiencing unnecessary pain, but the veterinarian dismisses their concerns and proceeds.

Table Discussion

- 1 · What emotions might this student experience?
- 2 · How should students be taught to speak up respectfully? How can programs prepare students to navigate hierarchical relationships with veterinarians and supervisors?
- 3 · If this case continued to trouble the graduate after the procedure, what support should they know to seek and does your school provide this guidance proactively?

LARGE GROUP DEBRIEF

How can we teach students to use structured tools (like "I-statements") to voice patient advocacy concerns to an intimidating superior?

TEACHING ACTIVITY · CASE STUDY

Speaking Up When Something Feels Wrong

THE CASE

A dog presents with injuries that appear inconsistent with the owner's explanation. The technician suspects abuse, but the veterinarian documents the injuries without discussing reporting the case. The new graduate is unsure whether to raise their concerns or assume there is information they don't know.

Table Discussion

How do we teach students to...

- Recognize when injuries/clinical signs warrant further concern
- Ask respectful, evidence-based questions instead of making accusations
- Manage uncertainty when they don't have all the information
- Document observations objectively and professionally

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION: WORKPLACE
CULTURE ETHICAL DISCOMFORT

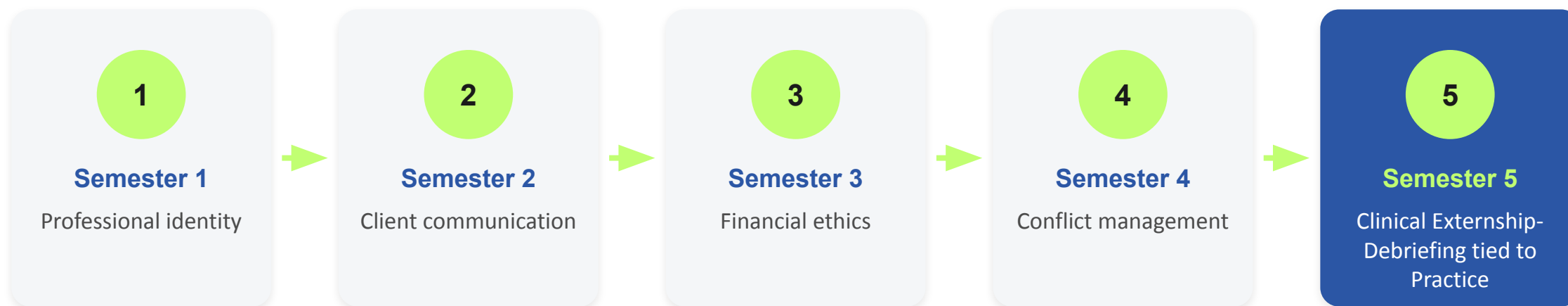
How can we train students to push back against a toxic workplace culture that normalizes **chronic ethical discomfort** as *"just part of the job"*?

RETHINKING THE STRUCTURE

Curriculum Brainstorm

Instead of **covering jurisprudence/legal scope/code of ethics in one course**, then **briefly touching on ethics throughout the curriculum thereafter**, intentionally thread ethics through every stage:

For example:



How would you change your program's structure? What's working?

Rethinking the Structure

Which model would/does work best in your program?...Are we missing another opportunity?

MODEL 1

Dedicated Ethics Course

A standalone course on ethical theory, legal duties, communication, and moral reasoning.

STRENGTHS

- Consistent content
- Faculty expertise
- Easy to assess

WATCH-OUTS

- Can feel disconnected from practice
- Ethics seen as “one class,” not ongoing

MODEL 2

Threaded Throughout the Curriculum

Ethical concepts revisited across courses as clinical knowledge grows.

EXAMPLE

- S1 — Professional identity
- S2 — Client communication
- S3 — Financial & legal dilemmas
- S4 — Patient advocacy & conflict mgmt
- Clinical — Reflection & debriefing

STRENGTHS

- Reinforces concepts over time
- Connects ethics to real cases
- Supports progressive development

WATCH-OUTS

- Requires faculty coordination
- Can drift without planning

MODEL 3

Clinical Integration

Ethical reasoning develops through simulations, externships, debriefs, and case discussions.

EXAMPLES

- Weekly ethical case
- Reflection journals
- Structured post-clinical debriefs
- Mentor discussions

STRENGTHS

- Closely mirrors real practice
- Highly engaging
- Encourages reflection

WATCH-OUTS

- Variable clinical experiences
- Hard to standardize



RAPID-FIRE LIST

Teaching Ideas

Concrete ways to build ethical reasoning into your program

1 Case studies

2 Ethics rounds

3 Reflection journals

4 Role play

5 Simulation

6 Peer discussion

7 Structured debriefing

8 Decision trees

9 Reflective writing

Other unique ideas anyone would like to share?



Takeaways



Ethics is not simply a one-time lecture



Ethics develops through experience and multiple discussions



Education, paired with real-life experience, can shorten the learning curve



Mentorship, Reflection, and Curriculum all matter



**Students need practice before graduation =
Reduces burnout, results in stronger patient advocacy, improved new grad confidence and resilience**

THANK YOU

What's one change you can make this year that will better prepare your graduates for their first ethical dilemma?

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