

Poetry and Veterinary Medicine: A Report from Across the Border

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Introduction

This paper describes “Poetry and Veterinary Medicine: A Report from Across the Border” presented at the 2004 Vital Lines, Vital Signs Conference, framing that description with some “before” and “after” context, including a discussion of the exchanges that occurred during and after the conference. Our presentation was a report from across the border; this is a report on that report.

In January of 2004 we discovered the Vital Lines, Vital Signs web site while searching for interesting links to add to our own web site for the Society for Veterinary Medicine and Literature. The discovery was exciting to us for several reasons, each with an element of serendipity.

We had begun the Society as an outgrowth of our elective course in veterinary medicine and literature offered at NC State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) since April 2002. The course was developed and taught by a veterinary surgeon (EAS) and a poet (HW). Although we knew that literature was an accepted part of many medical school curricula – in fact, Robert Coles’ pioneering work at Harvard in the 1980’s was an early inspiration for our thinking – in 2004 our course was still the only one of its kind in a veterinary medical school.

Now we had found that there were like-minded colleagues right in our own neighborhood, at Duke, planning a conference on poetry and medicine to be held only 20 miles away. In addition, a quick look at the featured conference attendees showed many happy conjunctions. John Stone’s book, *On Doctoring*, had contributed a few key readings to our syllabus, including his poem, “Talking to the Family.” Rafael Campo’s *The Desire to Heal* was another early inspiration in our course planning. And the closing reading was to be given by Mark Doty, who the literature-and-medicine community may think of for his poetry on illness, but who we had embraced for his poetry on dogs. (As we found out at the end of the conference, he has also written wonderful poems that combine these themes.) Doty’s poem “Beau: Golden Retrievals” was not only the frame for our course, as prelude and ending benediction, but its reading by EAS had become a tradition in the CVM graduation. We had already corresponded with Doty, who had agreed to let us put “Beau” on our Society web site. Finally, the conference was scheduled for the weekend before we were to teach our elective – timing that promised to reinvigorate and inspire us for our class.

We sent off an inquiry to the conference e-mail and were invited to submit a proposal. A few weeks later, we were delighted that the conference organizers decided that the teaching of poetry and veterinary medicine was not too far afield to be part of the conference conversation. Planning our presentation for the conference and reading what other presenters would discuss were in themselves fruitful activities, giving us the opportunity to think through the similarities and differences between the use of poetry in the human medicine and veterinary medicine fields.

Our conference presentation

Our presentation was designed to share with our colleagues in the medical and poetry community what we believed would be of interest about our introduction of a course in veterinary medicine and literature into the veterinary curriculum.

Why a course in veterinary medicine and literature?

During our presentation, we assumed the rationale for using poetry in the human medical curriculum to be well understood by conference participants, but the rationale for its counterpart in veterinary education to be worth explaining.

Many of the skills needed to be a good veterinarian are similar to those required for a physician. The interaction between a veterinarian and an animal owner depends on language – telling and hearing the case history, assimilating and explaining the findings and results, and relating the diagnosis and recommendations. Surveys of veterinarians have reaffirmed that communication skills are important for veterinarians and that our graduates could be better prepared. In the current curriculum, case presentations and discussions play a major role in helping students learn to integrate client information with physical examination and laboratory data. However, in case studies, the students can become focused on the medical problem, and disregard the fact that there are a whole animal and person involved. The human-animal interaction and the relative value of the animal to the owner might not even enter into the discussion, especially when there are differences in culture or communication style between the client and the medical staff.

Likewise, veterinary ethics is usually taught using case studies with small-group discussion. In one study, no significant improvement in ethical thinking was found after such a course, as determined by standardized pre- and post-testing.¹ Thus, we wanted to explore other ways for students to approach ethical issues. We had found that in human medicine, the study of literature is used to foster the ethical thinking of students as they grapple with the daily challenges of medicine. Professors of these medicine-literature courses explained that literature may suggest “responses without dictating them, urge behaviors without ordering, illuminate values without oversimplifying them.”²

As with physicians, veterinarians constantly try to balance the multiple demands in their professional and personal life. We wanted to explore Robert Coles’ feeling that literature can cause us to reflect on our own lives by asking, “How do you balance your business life and your home life? How do you resist the temptation to become callous and selfish? How do you hold to moral and religious values in the face of all sorts of challenges at work? What happens to people, emotionally and spiritually, when they compromise with certain important principles – start down the road of rationalizations and self-justifications...” Literature “helps us to shape a general attitude toward living a life – encouraging us to think about what we want and at what personal or professional cost.”³

Because of the location of most veterinary schools, the interaction between students and minority clients is minimal. Helping our graduates appreciate the growing diversity of our population and the need to understand different cultural values requires innovative

approaches.⁴ We thought that literature could help our students broaden their world views as they read and discussed literature from a variety of situations.

As a veterinary educator and head of a clinical department, EAS has had a long time interest in finding creative ways to help students learn. For years, EAS has followed the work of Coles and others, who have used literature to help students acquire life skills. However, it wasn't until EAS met a kindred spirit, HW, who is a poet, that we were able to incorporate these ideas into the veterinary curriculum

Designing the course

We began our course planning with a clear idea of our objectives. Some of these objectives were similar to those we had seen in medical curricula, such as: 1) Increase understanding and empathy towards clients, other veterinarians, and staff; and 2) Reflect on what it means to be a good veterinarian.

Our content departed from the medical curriculum, however, in significant ways. For example, veterinarians interact with clients who are not patients, which is somewhat similar to a pediatrician. As Mark Doty commented in the discussion after our presentation, in veterinary medicine the patient is always speechless, with others providing the words. Our patients are not responsible for their own illness, in the sense that smoking and other personal choices may contribute to human illness, nor for their cure, in the sense of following a prescribed regimen. Veterinarians often care for patients throughout the life of the animal. In most instances, the expected lifespan is much shorter than in humans and death is an expected and integral part of that lifecycle. Veterinarians have the ability, and sometimes the responsibility, to euthanize animals when the animal's quality of life deteriorates. Animals may also be killed to provide food, to advance the health of humans or other animals, or because they are too destructive, dangerous, or numerous.

As a result of these dissimilarities, some of the objectives for our course were different from what we had found in the medical curricula. For example, we wanted our students to understand the personal connection between clients and their animals and between the veterinarian and their patients. We also wanted to use the rich literature of animals, including the human-animal bond, learning from animals, and connecting with the natural world, to speak to our students. In addition, we wanted our students to use literature to help renew their purpose, reminding them why they wanted to become veterinarians.

We knew that some of our prospective students had given up on poetry because of bad experiences in high school and college. Hence, we had as an additional objective that we wanted them to connect with poetry and learn how to read a poem – in the belief that this capacity would provide a lifelong

As we began culling readings, we realized that it would take a very creative synthesis to shape the huge volume and range of plausible candidates into a coherent whole that could be covered in a one-week course. For example, at least 8 collections of poems about dogs had been published in the previous 3 years! To address this challenge, we defined 10 themes that linked the objectives to the context of the students' lives. We started the class with a theme of immediate relevance to the students (ie, the

transformation from past lives into a veterinary student and then into a veterinarian). We then moved on to themes such as client communication, the human-animal bond, dying, why write, finding and telling your stories, death and grief, being a scientist, and ended with retaining purpose and joy. With this framework, we quickly proceeded to make the selections, create questions on the readings, and plan our own instruction. Because this was literature, the themes and selections cut across each other, so that in our teaching, later discussions were able to weave in previous themes in a new context.

For our VLVS presentation, we selected reading samples for three themes that we thought would be of interest to our audience but that did not appear to be widely covered by other conference participants. The selected readings are listed below, along with some commentary, including ideas that came out during the discussion in the session.

The transformation – from past lives to veterinary students to veterinarians

We found that the transformation theme was an excellent way to reach our students where we found them at the beginning of the class – blurry-eyed from the demands of a demanding traditional curriculum – and help them make the transition into the more reflective realm of the imagination. Our class was a one-week elective offered at the end of the spring semester. Many of our students, it turned out, had been literature majors and avid readers as undergraduates, but had done little outside reading during the school year. Reading and thinking about transformations gave them a natural way to re-connect with their earlier selves and contemplate integrating these dimensions into their current and future lives.

We read and discussed these poems in our VLVS presentation:

Robert Frost, “The Span of Life.”

Randall Jarrell called this a slight poem, “...yet the sigh we give after reading this poem is not a slight one.” Jarrell read Frost’s poem as a metaphor for the human lifespan; for our students, it has literal meaning as well.

Thomas Lux, “The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently”

We recommend this poem as a wonderful way to begin any return-to-reading class or workshop where participants need to make a transition from their mundane routines into their inner world. Our students recognized this voice as one they might have lost in their transformation to hardworking veterinary students, but were pleased to return to. Its choice of details was a happy one for our audience: a barn, horse-gnawed stalls, and cows.

In our course, we also use Emily Dickinson’s “Surgeons Must Be Very Careful,” Oliver Holmes’ “The Stethoscope Song,” and John Stone’s “Talking to the Family” in our discussion of transformation.

The human-animal bond

A rich genre of poetry deals with the human-animal bond. This topic is also well-discussed in the veterinary field, but typically from a scientific point of view to which

poetry is a welcome counterpoint. As poet Molly Peacock wrote, “When the animal enters the poem the true self of the poet enters.” (personal communication).

In our presentation, we read and discussed Mark Doty’s “Beau: Golden Retrievals” as our human-animal bond selection. Imagine the delight but also trepidation of our (HW) reading this poem in the conference presentation with its author in the audience. Doty was a very gracious listener!

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, this poem has become a mainstay in our class as well as at CVM graduation. In the class, we read it as a sort of prelude to the course (although its theme and full discussion do not come up until several days later). We read it not only for its depiction of the human-animal bond and for what animals can bring to our lives, but also for its sheer craft. On the animal theme, almost all our students have or have had a pet who has done something for them similar to what Beau does for his “haze-headed friend,” the human. A discussion of this is a sure-fire way to engage the students.

For our objective to help our students connect with poetry and learn how to read a poem, no poem could better demonstrate that a poem can be completely open at first reading and, because of its rich craft, continue to yield more and more in each successive reading. That it is a sonnet illustrating everything the modern sonnet can be, and grounding our discussion of the sonnet throughout the course, is the icing on the cake.

In our course, we also use Denise Levertov’s “Come into Animal Presence” and “Her Sadness” and Maxine Kumin’s “Amanda Dreams She Has Died and Gone to the Elysian Fields” and “Eyes” to discuss the human-animal bond.

While attending the VLVS conference and listening to the poetry and the discussions, we were reminded of how important the human animal bond can be in human well-being. For example, we have heard of immunocompromised patients being told by their physicians to get rid of their dog or cat because of worries about disease transmission. Instead of disposing of one of their closest companions, the patients just stop telling the physician about their pets. Perhaps a physician could use one of the animal poems to help relate to the patient and honor the importance of pets within their lives and, at the same time, help the patient take measures to minimize potential contamination. Fortunately, healthcare workers are becoming more aware that animals may help patients deal with their illnesses and give them reasons to live. The poetry of animals can also help all of us focus on what is important in our lives; certainly Mark Doty’s poem, “Beau,” exemplifies that feeling.

Renewing purpose and joy

Our final theme captured the real purpose of the class – the value that poetry and literature can have in a lifelong ability to retain the purpose and joy that motivated one’s initial choice of a medical career. In our course sequence, this concluding theme has proved especially important because it follows the previous day’s immersion in themes of loss, dying, death, and grief.

In our presentation, we read and discussed two poems:

Billy Collins, “Why I Don’t Keep a Gun in the House” is a humorous look at a serious rift in the human animal bond – the incessant barking of the neighbor’s dog.

Hilde Weisert, “Imagination Itself.” We begin our course with the inner voice that Thomas Lux writes about. We end with something closely related, the imagination. This poem by HW deals with the importance of the imagination and connection with the natural world. Its origins tie in nicely with the class; it was written for a residency in “science and poetry” in a NJ school system, and attempts to bridge that divide, or show that the divide is false. The poem takes its inspiration from a line by William Blake: “To the eyes of a man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.”

In our course, we also use James Wright’s “A Blessing” as part of renewing purpose and joy. “A Blessing” is a magical and deeply poetic – ie, non-translatable – country-roadside encounter with two ponies, and with a crossing that is [almost] stepping out of one’s own body.

Our course concludes where we began, with a reading of “Beau.” By this time, in our class, Doty and Beau were old friends to whom it was joyful to return. For almost all our students, “Beau” became their own poem.

The students’ experience of the course

A survey was completed by participating students on the last day of the course.⁵ Although most of them said they had not reflected on what it means to be a good veterinarian in the week before the class, all of them had done so during the class. Comments included: “The discussion and thought process that resulted were very reflective and sparked new ideas;” “Absolutely...opened up a whole new line of thinking and processing for me;” “Made me realize the importance of my imagination in veterinary medicine.”

They felt that their understanding and empathy towards clients, other veterinarians, and staff would be affected by what they read and discussed during the week. Comments included: “Just understanding the different perspectives of people was a great lesson. A lot of the readings stressed the intensity of human-animal bonds that exist;” “...important to remember that others may be suffering even if all is well with you;” “The readings from the perspective of pet owners particularly helped reinforce this feeling.”

Their thinking about personal connections between the clients and their animals, and the veterinarian and their patients, had been stimulated during the week. Comments included: “I think hearing the perspectives from physicians made me more aware of the unique bond veterinarians have with their patients;” “The readings, and even of greater importance, the discussions brought to light how differently people view their animals, both as veterinarians and as owners;” “This course brought some of the humanity, kindness, and emotion into my veterinary school training and experience;”

Most of the students reported a strengthened sense of purpose (remembering why they wanted to be a veterinarian) at the end of the course. One first-year student commented that “Vet school kills any excitement about being a vet. This course was very refreshing.” Another comment was “It’s nice to re-connect with why I wanted to come to

vet school.” Other benefits that the students described included “a visit with my long lost friend, creativity;” “I thank you for reminding me of my artistic side and making me remember to pay attention to it!;” “Great to get to see different perceptions of veterinary medicine; also, poetry brought new light to the human-animal bond;” It succeeded in “rejuvenating the spirit;” “it provides a forum for discussing ethics, feelings – a place where you can learn from others’ opinions and views;” “It has allowed me to realize that I am as passionate about my chosen profession as I was when I entered school (although 3 years of classes may have convinced me otherwise).” A third year student commented, “I found it incredibly helpful for me to have this experience before starting my clinical rotations in a week”⁵

What’s next? Our plans and liaisons from this conference

The last topic in our presentation dealt with our plans for a wider exchange and discussion within the veterinary field and with other disciplines. To get the word out to the veterinary field, we had recently published an article in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA): “Perspectives in Professional Education: Introducing a Course in Veterinary Medicine and Literature into the Veterinary Curriculum.”⁵ We had founded the Society for Veterinary Medicine and Literature (<http://www.vetmedandlit.org>) as a way to build connections across disciplines. Our participation at VLVS was an important first step, and we conclude this paper with a discussion of the conversations and liaisons stimulated by the conference.

Conversations and liaisons from VLVS

The serendipity we mentioned at the beginning of this paper continued in the conversation during our presentation, in other conference events and exchanges, and it continues in the liaisons we look forward to in the future. Following are a few examples.

Peter Kussin’s introduction to our presentation

We were fortunate to have Peter Kussin introduce our session. In his introduction, Kussin, Associate Clinical Professor of Pulmonology at Duke University Medical Center and an opening speaker at the conference, brought out interesting points of intersection with human medicine, including euthanasia/end of life issues, grieving, and the caregiver’s bereavement.

Discussion during the presentation

In addition to a good conversation about the poems we read, some of which we described earlier, the presentation discussion also included an exchange that helped us to deal with a problem.

A member of the audience asked about how difficult it had been to introduce this kind of course in a veterinary school. This led into EAS’ discussion of our recently-published paper in JAVMA. Although only published a few weeks before the conference, it had already provoked both positive and negative responses. A disparaging letter from a practicing veterinarian had been forwarded to EAS by the editor for comment in the next

issue. We shared the letter because we felt that audience members may have encountered similar reactions when they first tried to introduce poetry into the medical setting. The letter writer had asserted that introducing a course in veterinary medicine and literature “was a waste of time and paper for everyone concerned”; he went on to say, “While readings in poetry may be beneficial for students with a liberal arts background... I can’t help but to think that such readings would be perceived negatively as too touch-feely and be counterproductive for most veterinary students. That is not to say they are not without use, rather that their usefulness is quite limited.”

The comments of the VLVS audience were quite reinforcing for our efforts and encouraged a forceful response to the letter. Peter Kussin volunteered to co-author the letter with us.

Thus, in the journal, we responded to the letter-writer’s comment about poetry by stating that “we recently presented our course at a poetry and medicine conference sponsored by the Duke University Center for the Study of Medical Ethics and Humanities... We recognize that many medical and veterinary students were science majors and may be apprehensive about poetry because of poor experiences in high school or college. Thus, selected poems are both pertinent and profound, while helping students understand the complex issues and emotions they face... The introduction of poetry into a veterinary school curriculum complements the already broad application of poetry in human patient care and medical education. In the sphere of human medicine, poetry has lent support to patients and caregivers in coping with the most difficult aspects of illness – pain, suffering, death and grieving. We maintain that the potential for poetry to improve veterinary care is no less significant. Far from being ‘a waste of time’ or ‘of limited use’, we agree with the American poet and physician William Carlos Williams that

"It is difficult
to get news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there"

Mark Doty’s closing reading

The poem “Ultrasound,” read by Mark Doty in his closing reading at the end of the conference, provided a final instance of serendipity and discovery. “Ultrasound” combines the themes of illness and animals, crossing the border between human and veterinary medicine. We did not know “Ultrasound” before VLVS, but it will make an indispensable addition to our course and a poem we will share with colleagues. Doty’s comment that “the animal body becomes a place where one can say things about one’s own wordless body and the language of suffering” was an extension of some of his earlier comments from our presentation. We find ourselves returning to his notion when we read many other poems, and it deepens their reading.

Another poem of Doty’s, “Shelter,” speaks not only to human frailty but also to an important and sometimes difficult area for our students, animal shelter medicine. Once

again, a subject metaphorical for human medicine is both metaphorical and literal in our field.

Other liaisons, new readings, and future directions

Following are a few of the other liaisons, new readings for our course, and ideas for future directions resulting from our attendance at VLVS.

John Stone explained to us that his *On Doctoring* anthology is, through foundation funding, provided to every first-year medical student in the US. Although doing something similar with an anthology for veterinary medicine is premature, we did find the idea intriguing and will keep it in mind should the discussion of literature in veterinary education become more widely adopted. We have been in contact with faculty from several other veterinary schools, such as the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who are interested in integrating literature into the curriculum, so we believe that that will happen in time.

In addition to the selections mentioned earlier, other readings gleaned from the conference that we plan to add to our course include William Carlos Williams' "To A Dog in the Street" and Mary Oliver's poem "Her Grave," suggested by Deborah Pope, Duke University Professor of English and a member of the VLVS Conference Committee.

Finally, the VLVS conference stimulated our own ideas for a Literature and Veterinary Medicine Conference, to be sponsored by our Society, in two or three years.

¹ Self DJ, Pierce AB, Shaddock JA. Description and evaluation of a course in veterinary ethics. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1995;207:1550-1553.

² Wear D. and Nixon LL. Literary inquiry and professional development in medicine. *Perspec Biol Med* 2002;45:104-124.

³ Coles R. Storytellers' ethics. *Harv Bus Rev* 1987:Mar-Apr, 8-14.

⁴ Stone, EA, DA Shugars, JD Bader, EH O'Neil: Attitudes of veterinarians toward emerging competencies for health care practitioners. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1992;201:1849-1853.

⁵ Stone, EA and Weisert, HA. Perspectives in professional education: Introducing a course in veterinary medicine and literature into a veterinary curriculum. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004, 224:1249-1253.