

Dissection and Dissent

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"If every teacher and student considering dissection were to first witness the capture, handling and death of each animal they were about to dissect, dissection would fast become an endangered classroom exercise."

The elimination of harmful uses of animals in education is clearly consistent with animal rights thinking. Yet, the recent history of the dissection controversy in the United States has not emphasized efforts to ban the practice. Rather, the debate has focused on providing choices for students.

Laws Supporting Conscientious Objectors are being Enacted.

California high school student Jenifer Graham gained celebrity when she took her school to court in 1987 for not allowing her to learn frog anatomy without dissecting a killed frog. That case spawned the 1988 passage of California's student choice-in-dissection law. (Similar laws also exist in Florida, Pennsylvania, and New York.)

In 1995, the courts awarded Safia Rubaii, a former University of Colorado medical student \$95,000 after the university refused to exempt her from a lethal dog lab.

Internationally, dissection has faced harsher criticism: Argentina (1987) and the Slovak Republic (1994) banned the practice, and Italy enacted a law in 1993 recognizing the right of conscientious objectors to refuse to participate in animal experimentation and dissection.

Animals Suffer Cruel Treatment.

The basis for students' objections to dissection is the belief that it is wrong to harm and kill animals for education. The conditions endured by animals slated for dissection bolster this view. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' 1990 investigation of Carolina Biological Supply Company, America's largest

supplier of dissection materials, uncovered horrific animal mistreatment. Undercover video footage revealed cats being prodded into crowded gas chambers, and cats and rats still moving while strapped to embalming racks. In 1994 and 1995, investigators with the World Society for the Protection of Animals discovered gruesome killing methods being used on cats being shipped from Mexico to the United States for classroom dissection. At one facility, cats were drowned ten at a time in burlap sacks; at another, blocks of wood were wedged into the cats' mouths to restrain them while their throats were cut. *BioScience* magazine published an account describing shipments of live frogs in which the animals suffer dehydration, overheating, freezing, rotting, crushing, and death. *Few teachers and students are aware of this behind-the-scenes suffering*, and one wonders how quickly dissection would decline if they had first to witness it.

Alternative Learning Methods Equal or Surpass Dissection.

Animal suffering aside, the assumption that nonanimal alternatives are educationally inferior is being scientifically refuted. In the past decade, at least a dozen published studies in educational and biological journals have shown that humane alternatives equal or surpass dissection in knowledge gained and speed of learning.

Effective Alternatives are Available.

This mounting evidence against dissection's presumed superiority is helping to fuel a burgeoning alternatives market. CD-ROMs [e.g., A.D.A.M.® Software] are especially

impressive. Alternatives can now be borrowed from The Humane Society of the United States, the National Anti-Vivisection Society, the New England Anti-Vivisection Society, and the American Anti-vivisection Society. (See Alternatives Resources Available.)

Transition is Slow.

Dissection has tradition on its side. As long as the cruelties remain hidden and the assumptions about alternatives go unchallenged, the system is not about to change on its own—public opposition must make it change. The biggest friend of the biological supply companies and the dissection advocates is public silence. According to surveys conducted by biology teachers and professors, most students have reservations about dissection, but only a fraction of them raise their concerns publicly. As we look toward the end of the millennium, one of the goals of the animal rights movement must be to awaken the silent majority of the classroom: the students who form the roots of education reform. The practice of dissection is already weakened, but the ramparts of tradition aren't likely to fall if little pressure is applied to them.

Dissection must be challenged at every opportunity. So speak out!

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Editor's Note: Although this article was written primarily to address undergraduate or high school biology dissection, it applies equally to the anatomy and physiology "specimens" that show up in our veterinary school labs. We should not hesitate to question and challenge, if necessary, the sources of these animals.