

## An attitude of veterinary practitioners towards animal rights in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT:** The authors examined the attitudes of veterinary practitioners in Turkey towards animals' right to life. For this purpose, a telephone questionnaire was applied on a total of 303 practitioners located in four provinces in Turkey. The overall response rate was 82%. The respect for right to life was valued slightly over neutral. According to the 5-point Likert scale, the average value scored by the participants for the items of views about animals' right to life was found as 3.25. Type of practice (pet clinics: 3.41), gender (females: 3.63), perceived responsibility (to animal: 3.48), keeping a pet (yes: 3.34) and membership in a society (yes: 3.67) had a statistically significant influence on attitudes towards animals' right to life. Independent variables explained 87% of the variance in attitudes, with most of the variance accounted for by perceived responsibility.

**Keywords:** animal rights; animals' right to live; veterinarian; veterinary practitioners

It is significant that discussions about equality and rights in moral and political philosophy are almost always formulated as problems of human equality and human rights. The effect of this is that the issue of the equality of animals never confronts the philosopher or his students as an issue in itself possibly due to a failure in challenging accepted beliefs (Singer, 1977). The subject of animal rights has caused considerable disquiet and discomfort among veterinarians. Some of them see an additional challenge to the economic viability of the profession in animal rights (Tannenbaum, 1995). For others, the concept of animal rights poses a danger to the natu-

ral order, science, and progress (Jacobs, 1984). Many veterinarians find animal rights so antithetical to the aims and values of the profession that they prefer not to speak of animal "rights" at all (Tannenbaum, 1995). According to Armistead (1985), the battle over animal rights has caught veterinarians in the "crossfire" – a metaphor that might suggest to some that veterinarians are doomed, and to others that the profession must make a quick retreat from the entire controversy. Although they condemn much in veterinary practice as immoral, some leaders of the animal rights movement argue that veterinarians should join their cause (Tannenbaum, 1995).

Although there are few publications on public views about animal rights, the number of studies or meetings that aimed to determine and discuss attitudes of veterinarians towards animal rights is quite limited in Turkey. On the other hand, to the authors' knowledge, no surveys have been conducted to specifically determine attitudes of veterinarians towards right to life in Turkey or any other parts of the world until now. Considering the fact that the material of veterinary profession is animal, it is of utmost importance to determine ideas and attitudes of members of this profession towards animal rights.

The objective of this study was to determine the respect level of veterinarians practicing in four provinces in Turkey for animals' right to life.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A survey was designed to measure attitudes of veterinary practitioners towards animals' right to life. The questions were developed on the basis of discussions with veterinarians and veterinary educators in addition to the evaluation of the literature. The question about the right to life consisted of six items that were presented according to 5-point Likert scale (differences, euthanasia, decision, economic value, eradication, economic cure), and demographic information was also collected in five questions (gender, type of practice, responsibility, keeping a pet, membership in a society). The questionnaire was pretested on 10 veterinarians.

The total number of 303 veterinarians practicing in four provinces were telephoned and asked to participate in the survey. The provinces were Ankara (located in the centre of the country), Istanbul (west of the country), Elazig (east of the country), and Konya (south of the country). The participants were asked to rate each of the items with respect to the right to life. A 5-point Likert scale was used, and all ratings were scored from 1 for "strongly disagree" through 5 for "strongly agree" with "neutral" in the middle of the scale scored as 3 (Tavsancil, 2002). When comparisons were made between groups for individual items, a score  $<3$  was classified as disagreement with the item and interpreted as feeling, for example, insensitive about the item. A score  $\geq 3$  was interpreted as feeling sensitive about the item.

Telephone survey was carried out in October 2002. Telephone calls were made every day except for Sundays between 09.00–17.00 hours, but particu-

larly on Saturdays. When the appropriate veterinarian was not available, the calls were repeated, but if the interview had not been obtained after six calls, no further attempt was made. Data on the total number of clinics were obtained from Ministry of Agriculture at the beginning of 2002.

SPSS Version 11.0 for Windows was used for all statistical analyses. Frequencies were used for demographic analyses. A mean rating was calculated for attitudes towards animals' right to life. *P* values were calculated for the parametric tests among groups. Independent Student's *t*-test was used to measure differences between gender, keeping a pet, and membership in society groups. Analysis of variance was used to determine the differences between type of practice and perceived responsibility. Following these analyses, Duncan's test was applied for the group comparisons for the significant parameters (Akgul, 1997). A probability of less than 0.05 was considered as statistically significant.

## RESULTS

The overall response rate was 82% (247/303). The response rates of practitioners in different areas were distributed as follows: 69% (76/110) for Istanbul, 80% (56/70) for Ankara, 82% (18/22) for Elazig and 96% (97/101) for Konya. Data on gender, type of practice, perceived responsibility, keeping a pet, and membership in a society dealing with animal rights or animal protection are presented in Table 1.

The proportion of female practitioners was low (15%) in general. However, the number of participating female practitioners was found significantly higher in pet clinics (86.5%) than in large animal clinics (2.7%) and mixed clinics (10.8%). Of male practitioners, 43.8% worked in large animal clinics, 33.3% were in pet clinics and the remaining 22.9% were in mixed clinics.

The proportions of the pet, large animal and mixed practices surveyed in this study were 41.3%, 37.7% and 21.0%, respectively. Approximately half of the practitioners (43.3%) reported that they felt themselves more responsible to animal. More than half of the participants (52.6%) were keeping a pet. A significant proportion (95.0%) of practitioners reported that they had no membership in a society dealing with animal rights.

According to the 5-point Likert scale, the average value scored by the participants for the items of

Table 1. Demographics of the veterinarians who participated in the survey

Characteristics	PROVINCES				
	Elazig	Konya	Istanbul	Ankara	General
Gender					
male	17 (94%)	94 (97%)	58 (76%)	41 (73%)	210 (85%)
female	1 (6%)	3 (3%)	18 (24%)	15 (27%)	37 (15%)
Type of practice					
large animal	9 (50%)	70 (72%)	2 (3%)	12 (21%)	93 (37%)
pet	1 (6%)	2 (2%)	68 (89%)	31 (56%)	102 (41%)
mixed	8 (44%)	25 (26%)	6 (8%)	13 (23%)	52 (21%)
Responsibility <sup>a</sup>					
client	4 (22%)	33 (34%)	11 (15%)	8 (14%)	56 (23%)
animal	4 (22%)	24 (25%)	46 (60%)	38 (68%)	112 (45%)
community	5 (28%)	6 (6%)	2 (3%)	1 (2%)	14 (6%)
himself	5 (28%)	20 (21%)	17 (22%)	9 (16%)	51 (21%)
others	–	13 (14%)	–	–	13 (5%)
Keeping a pet <sup>b</sup>					
yes	4 (22%)	39 (40%)	54 (71%)	2 (4%)	130 (52%)
no	14 (22%)	58 (60%)	22 (29%)	54 (96%)	117 (48%)
Membership in a society <sup>c</sup>					
yes	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	8 (11%)	2 (4%)	12 (5%)
no	18 (100%)	95 (98%)	68 (89%)	54 (96%)	235 (95%)

<sup>a</sup>To whom do you feel responsibility?

<sup>b</sup>Do you keep a pet?

<sup>c</sup>Are you a member of a society dealing with animal rights?

views about animals' right to life was found as 3.25. This value was observed to be over 3 in all groups except the one that included the participants who felt themselves responsible to the client (Table 2).

In regression analysis, interaction terms and independent variables explained over 85% ( $R^2=0.87$ ) of variability in the sensitivity level about respect for animals' right to life.

When examined by province, it was determined that the most sensitive practitioners about respect for right to life were located in Ankara (3.65), which was followed by Istanbul (3.36), Elazig (3.09), and Konya (2.98). The proportions of practitioners below the average were calculated as 14.3%, 23.7%, 38.9% and 42.3% in Ankara, Istanbul, Elazig and Konya, respectively.

Although both genders were found to be sensitive about respect for right to life in general, values scored by females were significantly higher than those of males ( $P < 0.001$ ). The values scored for "decision" item were observed to be below the average in all demographic groups including the gender. However, gender was an exception in terms of sensitivity about "economic cure" item; female practitioners scored over the average for this item and the difference by gender was statistically significant ( $P = 0.01$ ) (Table 2).

When the results were examined by the type of practice, though all the participants were sensitive about respect for right to life, veterinary practitioners working in pet clinics were observed to be more sensitive ( $P < 0.001$ ). Although values scored for

Table 2. Mean scores for sensitivity of veterinary practitioners about the respect for animals' right to life

Items	General <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Type of practice	Responsibility	Keeping a pet	Membership in a society
Differences: Thinking ability does not make humans superior to animals	3.39	M-3.35	Lc-3.20	Cl-3.30	Y-3.58	Y-3.67
		F-3.62	Pc-3.62	An-3.43	N-3.19	N-3.38
			Mc-3.29	Co-2.92		
			<i>P</i> = 0.045	Hs-3.58	Ot-3.23	<i>P</i> = 0.015
Euthanasia: I am against euthanasia application	3.41	M-3.42	Lc-3.54	Cl-3.33	Y-3.28	Y-3.00
		F-3.32	Pc-3.10	An-3.35	N-3.55	N-3.43
			Mc-3.77	Co-3.57		
			<i>P</i> < 0.001	Hs-3.47	Ot-3.84	
Decision: Any applications that may damage the nature of animal are no problem for me as long as requested by client	2.60	M-2.60	Lc-2.76	Cl-2.60	Y-2.60	Y-2.92
		F-2.59	Pc-2.59	An-2.69	N-2.59	N-2.58
			Mc-2.35	Co-2.85		
				Hs-2.25	Ot-2.69	
Economic value: If cost of cure is in excess of purchasing cost, the best way is to apply euthanasia	3.79	M-3.65	Lc-3.18	Cl-3.32	Y-4.05	Y-4.83
		F-4.59	Pc-4.46	An-4.14	N-3.51	N-3.74
			Mc-3.58	Co-3.64		
		<i>P</i> < 0.001	<i>P</i> < 0.001	Hs-3.75	Ot-3.30	<i>P</i> < 0.001
Eradication: The most effective control strategy against contagious diseases is to kill unhouseed animals	3.71	M-3.57	Lc-3.33	Cl-3.10	Y-3.88	Y-4.58
		F-4.49	Pc-4.27	An-4.18	N-3.52	N-3.74
			Mc-3.27	Co-3.50		
		<i>P</i> < 0.001	<i>P</i> < 0.001	Hs-3.53	Ot-3.15	<i>P</i> = 0.006
Economic cure: Economic situation of the client affects my decision on choosing cure applications	2.65	M-2.57	Lc-2.47	Cl-2.05	Y-2.65	Y-3.00
		F-3.16	Pc-2.90	An-3.07	N-2.66	N-2.63
			Mc-2.48	Co-2.50		
		<i>P</i> = 0.011	<i>P</i> = 0.040	Hs-2.61	Ot-2.00	
Average <sup>b</sup>	3.25	M-3.19	Lc-3.08	Cl-2.96	Y-3.34	Y-3.67
		F-3.63	Pc-3.41	An-3.48	N-3.17	N-3.24
			Mc-3.12	Co-3.17		
		<i>P</i> < 0.001	<i>P</i> < 0.001	Hs-3.20	Ot-3.04	<i>P</i> = 0.022
					<i>P</i> < 0.001	

M = male, F = female, Lc = large animal clinics, Pc = pet clinics, Mc = mixed clinics, Cl = clients, An = animal, Co = community, Hs = himself, Ot = others, Y = yes, N = no

<sup>a</sup>average values for each item

<sup>b</sup>average values for the set consisting of six items about right to life

“decision” and “economic cure” items were found to be below 3, practitioners working in pet clinics were more sensitive about “economic cure” item than those working in other types of practice ( $P = 0.04$ ) (Table 2).

All the participants except for those who felt themselves responsible to their clients were determined to be sensitive about respect for right to life. The highest value was obtained from participants who felt themselves responsible to animal and the difference between the values in this group was statistically significant ( $P < 0.001$ ). Participants were sensitive about respect for right to life in all items except for “decision” and “economic cure”. Values of participants who felt themselves responsible to animal were observed to be the highest in most of the groups. Unlike other groups, veterinary practitioners who felt themselves responsible to animal were also sensitive about the “economic cure” item.

Although all participants, regardless of keeping a pet, were sensitive about respect for right to life, those keeping a pet were found to be more sensitive ( $P = 0.02$ ). Attitudes towards “decision” and “economic cure” items were scored below 3.

Likewise, all participants regardless of membership in a relevant society showed a sensitive attitude. However, the difference between the sensitivity levels of participants who were registered in a society and those who were not, was statistically significant ( $P = 0.03$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine ideas and attitudes of veterinary practitioners towards animals' right to life in Turkey and the data for this purpose were collected by a telephone interview, a method which has been shown comparable with personal interviews provided that the possession of a telephone is not a bias (Martin et al., 1987; Barrett et al., 1992). Telephone surveys can be a cost-effective method of achieving a high response rate which was 82% in the current study. It might have been possible to improve the response rate by increasing the number of calls to each practice rather than limiting them to a maximum of six. The high overall response rate for most items increased the likelihood that this study reflected the true feelings of the veterinarians.

Although the number of items in the questionnaire could be argued to be inadequate for measur-

ing attitudes towards the respect for right to life, it is believed to facilitate collection of data by telephone and to improve the response rate to a desirable level that minimizes the possibility of response bias. However, it should be underlined that the findings of the present study should be interpreted rather cautiously. More detailed studies will help us to have a better understanding of veterinarians' attitudes towards animals' right to life.

The mean score for the set of six items concerning animals' right to life was obtained to be 3.25. Although this value indicates that veterinary practitioners sampled here paid respect for the right to life, the degree of this respect could have been expected to be much higher.

According to Rollin (1999), animal welfare or animal rights are not a major issue for farm animal veterinarians. This is probably due to the fact that the major welfare issue regularly arising in a traditional agricultural practice, and directly relevant to veterinary medicine, has to do with treatable diseases whose treatment is not economically feasible. In the provinces the current study was conducted, the majority of clinics were large animal clinics in Konya and Elazig owing to the fact that farm animals were predominant in these areas. As the number of pet clinics is rather small, veterinary practitioners in these provinces are usually confronted with clients who evaluate the animal by its economic value. This situation might have affected the view of practitioners. As indicated by Rollin (1999), veterinarians probably felt as if they could not do much to advance welfare in the face of harsh economic realities and constraints. As a matter fact, the results of this survey showed that veterinary practitioners in Konya and Elazig rated lower for items about right to life when compared with those working in Ankara and Istanbul where pet and mixed clinics are predominant.

Females always demonstrate more sensitivity than males about emotional subjects, no matter whether they are veterinary students or practitioners or keep a pet (Case, 1988; Tinga et al., 2001). This was confirmed by the findings of the current study which revealed that female practitioners were much more sensitive about the respect for right to life. The number of female practitioners was rather small in this study. When the significant effect of gender on this subject was considered, the results of the present study should be interpreted cautiously, because the proportion of males was significantly higher than that of females in the sample popula-

tion. When the “decision” item was considered, female practitioners appeared to lose their sensitivity as well. However they differed from males in their sensitivity about the “economic cure” item.

Approximately half of veterinary practitioners (45%) surveyed in this study felt themselves responsible to an animal. Questions asking to find out to whom veterinarians are responsible comprise an important part of veterinary ethics, but there is no general agreement on this matter yet (Dincer, 2001). Veterinarians have responsibilities to themselves, animals, clients, colleagues, people they are working with and to the community in which they live (Ozen and Yerlikaya, 2001). However, perception of more responsibility to any of these may cause differences in attitudes and behaviours of veterinarians. The results of this study revealed that all the participants except those who felt themselves responsible to client showed the respect for right to life. However, practitioners feeling responsible to animal were determined to be much more respectful for right to life. These findings can be considered as evidence how the attitudes of practitioners could be affected by variation in perceived responsibility.

There are many publications that deal with the benefits of animal companion. In general, it is obvious that the demand for animal is associated with environmental positions (Ferry, 2000). However, it should be noted that companion animal might play a role in changes in environmental positions. Considering the fact that veterinarians are members of a profession the material of which is animal, they should be eager about companion animal in order to become more acquainted with animal, no matter in which sector they work (Dodurka, 2000). The finding that veterinary practitioners keeping a pet were more sensitive about the respect for right to life could be a consequence of displaying an eco-centric or biocentric position or vice versa.

Likewise, the finding that veterinarians who were members of a society dealing with animal rights, animal welfare, or animal protection were more sensitive than those who were not registered with such societies about right to life could be assessed in the same manner. However, keeping a pet or membership in a society seemed to have no significant effect on the attitude about the “decision” and “economic cure” items. This situation may indicate that veterinarians exhibit a dubious approach toward subjects concerning animal rights, as stated by Tischler (1983).

In conclusion, it could be said that veterinarians in Turkey who are expected to display the highest sensitivity owing to their profession were in dilemma arising out of discussion about animal rights and consequently they did not exhibit sensitivity at the expected level. However, it is believed that this study will trigger a discussion process on attitudes of veterinarians towards animal rights.

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