

Episode: *Author Interview: “How Should We Improve How Medical and Veterinary Students Learn About Human and Nonhuman Animals?”*

Guest: Jeff Sebo, PhD

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF (HOST): Welcome to another episode of the *Author Interview* series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Jeff Sebo, a clinical associate professor of environmental studies at New York University in New York City, where he is also the co-director of the Wild Animal Welfare Program and the director of the Animal Studies MA Program and the Mind, Ethics, and Policy Program at NYU. He’s here to discuss his article, coauthored with Zoe Griffiths, “*How Should We Improve How Medical and Veterinary Students Learn About Human and Nonhuman Animals?*,” in the April 2023 issue of the Journal, [Meat and Health](#). Dr Sebo, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR JEFF SEBO: Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

HOFF: So, what’s the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

SEBO: The article is generally about why animals matter for global health and environmental research and advocacy and policy, and also why global health and environmental research and advocacy and policy matter for animals, and how this can be better reflected in medical and veterinary education. So, the key points are that first of all, animals matter for their own sakes. We now recognize that sentient beings, beings who can experience pleasure and pain and other positive and negative welfare states, they matter, and they merit moral consideration. And that very many animals, at least all vertebrates and many invertebrates, are sentient. So, animals matter for their own sakes, and our treatment of animals matters for global health and the environment. For example, when we harm and kill animals in factory farming or deforestation or the wildlife trade, that not only harms and kills animals unnecessarily, but also contributes to global health and environmental threats like pandemics and climate change. And then global health and environmental threats like pandemics and climate change impact humans and nonhumans at the same time. For example, when a disease outbreak occurs, animals can be affected directly because they can contract the disease or indirectly because they can be vulnerable to violence or neglect from humans. And similarly, when the types of extreme weather events associated with climate change occur, animals can be impacted directly by fires or floods or other extreme weather as well as indirectly, again, by violence or neglect from humans.

So, human and animal and environmental health are all interconnected in those ways, and we need to understand that. But unfortunately, that is not well represented in medical and veterinary education currently, and animals are still harmed in medical and veterinary education currently. And so, the article is about how we can improve that so that the next generation of medical and veterinary practitioners can be better equipped to grapple with these linked human and animal and environmental harms.

HOFF: So, speaking of that next generation of practitioners, what's the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your article?

SEBO: I think the most important idea is that we need to keep the big picture in mind. We need to keep in mind how these global systems are affecting humans and animals and the environment at the same time. It can be tempting for clinicians to think about health care on an individual basis: "What can I as an individual clinician do for this individual patient?" But many of the most significant health threats we face now are global in nature, collective in nature, structural in nature. And so, if the leaders of our health care systems for humans and other animals are primarily thinking about these issues at the individual level and not as much thinking about these issues at the broader, more global, more collective, more structural level, then the people we look to for guidance are going to be missing out on some of the most significant indicators of bad health impacts for humans and other animals. And so, we need to be thinking about human and animal and environmental health in an interconnected way and in a structural way going beyond those individual interactions we have with clients or patients.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

SEBO: I think that I might have said more about the history of medical and veterinary education. So, for example, part of what is interesting about the current veterinary industry and the culture in the veterinary industry is that historically, this industry has had strong ties with animal agriculture. Right now, most veterinarians in the United States care for companion animals, but historically, a high percentage of veterinarians also cared for farmed animals. And of course, many still do. And because of that history, there are still those strong ties between animal agriculture and many veterinarians. And I think that that history and those relationships shape how many veterinarians think about our treatment of animals in agriculture, and it can make it hard for them to be leaders with respect to food system reform. And we badly need them to be leaders with respect to food system reform. And so, I think understanding these histories can help us find a better way to do medical and veterinary education, for example, so that we can create that next generation who understands these issues and is prepared to work to address them. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Dr Sebo, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and thanks to you and your coauthor for your contribution to the Journal this month.

SEBO: My pleasure. Thanks again for featuring the article.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, [JournalOfEthics.org](http://JournalOfEthics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.