

Bruce W. Kennedy, MS, RLATG, CMAR, CPIA, Column Coordinator



## The power of storytelling

Sarah Allison, DVM, DACLAM

I am a lab animal veterinarian who teaches as well, and in my own classroom I use stories to illustrate important points about biomedical research. As many have noted, storytelling is a powerful way to engage students<sup>1</sup>. I find that it is a very useful means by which to educate and inform.

Last year, I had the honor of serving as a Public Policy Faculty Fellow for the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. I spent several weeks in Washington, DC exploring public policy and the federal legislative process. As a veterinarian who supports biomedical research, I had great interest in attending congressional hearings about funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The proposed legislation, the 21st Century Cures Act, would increase funding for NIH that had been sorely lacking for the past decade. I attended one particular hearing that left me with a lasting impression; this was the Public and Outside Witness Hearing as presented to the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education departments and related agencies. During this hearing, more than 20 individuals testified in support of various health, welfare and educational organizations. As they testified before the congressional members and public attendees, each person told a story of how medical research affected their lives.

One young man's story was especially memorable to me. He was an advocate for increased funding for cardiovascular disease research, and he was joined by his mother, who gave his testimony when he struggled to speak during the hearing. They spoke about how the young man suddenly collapsed one day before a high school football game and was airlifted

to a hospital. He underwent testing and doctors discovered that he had suffered a stroke caused by an infection of his heart valve. Unfortunately, this infection caused him to suffer four more strokes. He was hospitalized for several months and, since his release, he has continued to experience health-related difficulties. The strokes had led to seizures, affecting his speech and use of the right side of his body. At the age of sixteen he dealt with limitations affecting his lifestyle, and he continues to face challenges in his health. After he completed his five-minute testimony, there was not a dry eye in the room. His story was so compelling that he convinced congressional representatives from both political parties to commend his efforts and to lend their verbal support for increased research funding. I was impressed not only by the courage and tenacity of this young man to publicly share his story; I was impressed also by the rare occurrence of bipartisan support on that day.

Back home in Illinois, I teach courses in laboratory animal medicine and discuss various topics that include research animal models, experimental techniques and regulations for conducting research. I was able to garner a lot more interest in the subject matter of this last topic when I told the story of why federal regulations came into being. I recounted the story of Pepper, a dog who wandered off from her family farm in Pennsylvania and wound up creating a national debate around the topic of where researchers obtain their animals. Pepper, unbeknownst to her owners, wandered into the possession of unscrupulous animal brokers and was sold to a medical institution for subsequent use in a research study<sup>2</sup>. Her family's call for political action

and the ensuing public debate led to the passage of the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act in 1966. Many of my students had no idea before this lecture—nay, the story—that this was the history behind the current animal welfare act. After the course, they understood that animals used in research are not stolen pets, despite the abundant misinformation that persists.

I remember how, after one class in particular, a student came up to me and thanked me for my lecture about regulations. This student took my course to see that the rhetoric propagated by anti-research groups and the negative publicity surrounding research don't tell the whole story. After taking this class, she was very appreciative because she was not previously aware that so much regulatory compliance is required to conduct animal research. Furthermore, she was thrilled that someone took the time to explain the true story of research and to broaden the perspective for an entire classroom. In her appreciation I felt the power that teaching can have through storytelling.

Imagine what we could accomplish for public support of research if we told our stories of the amazing animals that we work with every day and the care that we provide for them. Imagine what we could accomplish if we talked about the groundbreaking research discoveries that have helped people and animals alike to live healthier lives. The stories that we tell to illustrate greater truths and lessons can have a great and positive effect even if it reaches just one student at a time.

1. Kowalski, K. Storytelling: a leadership and educational tool. *J. Contin. Educ. Nurs.* **46**, 250–251 (2015).
2. Engber D. Pepper: the stolen dog that changed American science. *Slate* (June 2009).

Allison is an Assistant Director for the Division of Animal Resources and Clinical Assistant Professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IL.