

It takes a village, not a federal law

Cindy A. Buckmaster, PhD, CMAR, RLATG

“It takes a village to raise a child.” While the true origin of this ancient expression is unknown, all of us are familiar with its meaning as it relates to our communal responsibility to guide young people in the right direction. We accept the imperfection of human nature in even the youngest among us, and we shape our children to live as compassionate people with integrity, who embody ethical values and actions, in our homes, schools, churches, summer camps and other social settings. We do this because that is the way we wish to color our world, and these are the kind of people with whom we wish to share our personal and professional lives. We join together as a community to instill a subconscious moral framework for behavior within our children that allows them to perceive the goodness or badness of human character reflexively, and distinguish ‘right’ from ‘wrong.’ In doing so, we teach our children to embrace a culture of love that celebrates kindness and altruism as natural qualities of humanity, rather than societal obligations defined by laws. And, as they mature to adulthood, we hold them accountable for their behaviors, praising them for actions that align with our moral principles, and punishing them for those that do not. We don’t involve lawmakers and law enforcers in these early exercises. We handle them as a community, because laws don’t shape or motivate ethical behavior. Compliance is a natural byproduct of our alignment with established moral principles, and following ‘the law’ isn’t difficult, stressful or inconvenient for people that embrace a culture of love. Laws exist as a reflection of our inability or unwillingness, as a community, to hold our own accountable for their actions.

In July 2005, a company that is a global leader in antibody production paid \$4,600 in response to multiple United States

Department of Agriculture (USDA) citations of Animal Welfare Act (AWA) violations from 2002–2004. In July 2012, this same company was also cited for their failure to establish and maintain programs of adequate veterinary care based on multiple USDA findings. The USDA also issued citations against this company related to improper animal handling (2007),

We handle them as a community, because laws don’t shape or motivate ethical behavior.

improperly trained animal care staff (2010), inadequate oversight of painful procedures by the IACUC (2007, 2011, 2012), failure by the IACUC to ensure appropriate animal housing (2012), and failure to provide veterinary care to animals in need of care (2012). None of these citations were officially resolved and the USDA filed yet another complaint in November 2014 against this company, listing additional AWA violations from 2012–2014 that included deficiencies in veterinary care and IACUC oversight (2012–2014), inappropriate animal housing (2012), failure to provide animals with palatable, nutritious food (2012), insufficient cleaning of primary enclosures (2012), and failure to allow officials to inspect a barn housing covered species (2012). Even as recently as this past August, the USDA cited this company for repeated failures to provide minimally-adequate and expeditious veterinary care and treatment to animals and misleading APHIS personnel about the existence of an undisclosed location, where several elderly and sick goats were reportedly housed.

The animal suffering described in some of these cases is appalling and heartbreaking. I will spare you the details, but this single company has been cited for egregious and deliberate failures to follow the Animal Welfare Act for over a decade. The regulations supporting this federal law appear to have no meaning or value to this company, and the USDA has been unable to correct its behavior by trying to enforce them. I doubt they ever will. What I want to know is why the research community is waiting for the USDA to take care of this in the first place! These people are among our own and we have an obligation, as a community, to praise them for actions that align with our moral principles, and punish them for those that do not. When we do this effectively for all of our peers, compliance concerns dwindle and animal rights organizations lose their foothold over public opinion.

We have the means to do this now. The Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care, Intl. (AAALAC) has been raising the bar for animal care for over 50 years. They aren’t lawmakers or enforcers. They’re community peers who drive programmatic improvements for animals and science, because they fully embrace a culture of compassion and excellence. I am certain that the extensive list of citations reported for the large company mentioned above wouldn’t exist if they were fully accredited by AAALAC, and I propose that we make full accreditation mandatory for all research institutions working with animals. Full AAALAC accreditation should then become the ‘seal of approval’ required for funding, publication, granting degrees, and products acceptable for purchase. No ‘seal, no deal! Want to reduce regulatory burden? Create a culture that makes regulations seem superfluous. Let’s stop pointing fingers and be a village!

Buckmaster is Chair, Americans for Medical Progress, Alexandria, VA.