

Boulder Daily Camera

Secretly abusing animals: CU stops inhumane vivisection, but openness needed

Clint Talbott, for the editorial board
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In recent years, the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center has killed at least 18 dogs and 191 pigs during sales "training" for Boulder-based Valleylab. This appalling form of vivisection was not for legitimate research.

CU abruptly suspended the practice last month, noting that killing animals for sales-training purposes is inconsistent with the university's "core mission." No kidding. But if not for the dogged work of a local animal advocate, the carnage would not have been exposed, let alone stopped.

Boulder's Rita Anderson, who works on a contract basis for California-based In Defense of Animals, exhumed the program via formal requests under Colorado's Public Records Act. Good for her.

A CU spokeswoman confirmed the ghastly picture that emerged from hundreds of pages of public records obtained by Anderson: Valleylab, which was demonstrating electro-surgery tools, paid for the use of CU staff and facilities. Once the animals served their purpose — providing live, dissectable flesh — they were killed and thrown in the dump.

Daily Camera Senior Editor Clay Evans, who reported on this sordid affair Sunday, quoted a university staffer who helped anaesthetize pigs in one session. The staffer was disturbed by the participants' chipper nonchalance.

"There was a very jovial atmosphere. Everyone was joking around. (The woman) who planned the session was running around taking pictures," the staffer said.

"I was told animal research was always a last resort," he said. "But I've discovered that's not really true. It's just what they do, looking for an extra way to make money, or an extra project."

Because of Anderson's sleuthing, CU discontinued the sales-training sessions on Feb. 22. As a CU attorney noted, university facilities will no longer be used for programs "where the sole purpose is training of sales personnel."

Meanwhile, Valleylab told Evans that the company does not use live animals "for any marketing or sales product demonstration." University documents and the university itself refute Valleylab's falsehood.

Valleylab, one might argue, is under no obligation to tell the truth. The same cannot be said of CU. So how did this systemic form of animal abuse go undetected so long?

Part of the answer reflects the secretive "oversight" of CU's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. That group is supposed to ensure that no activity involving animals is "inappropriate, inhumane or not in accord with the approved protocol." Citizens have to take that assertion on faith.

The animal-care meetings, minutes and even its members are secret. As Evans reported in 2004, CU's obsessively secret animal-care committee has knowingly concealed evidence that the university planned to produce monkey embryos for profit (not research). CU claims such secrecy is necessary because of violent animal-rights activists.

The threat of "terrorism" is a fatuous way to exploit modern fears and to discredit mild-mannered Anderson, a 61-year-old grandmother. It is also an intellectually dishonest way to keep the public's business from the public.

But the "terrorism" ruse has served one purpose: It has allowed the state's pre-eminent university to abuse animals, year after year, with minimal chance of detection. Had the animal-care committee been open to public scrutiny — if it had been as transparent as President Hank Brown says CU must become — hundreds of animals would have been treated better. The university must subject the animal-use committee to the disinfecting and ultimately humane influence of sunshine.

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