

## Testing the Bounds—Advocating Animal Testing<sup>1</sup>

The first day of class at most universities is often a thrilling time, when students discover the road map for the next several months of their study in a particular subject. Professors distribute a syllabus, explain their expectations of student performance, and sometimes even delve into some preliminary substantive lectures. Professor John Smith—a psychology professor at a major state university—spends the first day of all of his undergraduate courses lecturing students about animal testing.

Professor Smith's lecture includes a PowerPoint presentation that provides an overview of advancements in the field of psychology that were arrived at from animal testing, including knowledge about how the central nervous system recovers after neural damage; the biological bases of fear, anxiety, and other stress reactions; the effects of psychotropic drugs; motivational processes; learning and memory; and addiction. This presentation also provides graphic depictions of various kinds of animal research used for these purposes.

In addition to the issues regarding psychological research, Prof. Smith also discusses the importance of animal testing for medicine—especially with respect to drug testing and surgical research. During this portion of the presentation, Prof. Smith includes images of harmful conditions that humans suffer without the products of animal research.

This lecture makes many students uncomfortable—especially freshmen in introductory-level courses, who had not before seen such graphic pictures of animal research. Many students are upset about this issue, but do not feel comfortable speaking out.

Occasionally, a student will challenge Prof. Smith, and argue against using animals in the ways Professor Smith's PowerPoint slides depict. Prof. Smith will usually ask them if they eat any animal products, and will tell them that if they want to rail against the use of animals in research, they had better not. Sometimes he will also point it out if they happen to be wearing a leather belt or shoes. Moreover, Prof. Smith notes, many cosmetics either contain animal products or are tested on animals, so one would have to avoid these as well. Finally, he insists, as he scrolls back through the slides about human suffering, if a student wants to complain about animal testing, they must be ok with losing opportunities to combat human hunger and to cure AIDS, cancer, and other diseases that impact millions of people world-wide.

Every semester, several students will drop Prof. Smith's course after this first meeting. Moreover, three or four students will routinely complain on Prof. Smith's end-of-semester evaluations that this first lecture is uncomfortable and/or inappropriate. Every so often, a student will make a complaint to Prof. Smith's Department Chair or Dean, that Prof. Smith is biased and improperly advocates his personal beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> This case is adapted from "Case 14: Testing the Bounds—Advocating Animal Testing", *Regional Ethics Bowl Cases: Fall 2010*, © 2010, Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, available online at: <http://www.indiana.edu/~appe/ethicsbowl.html>

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Is an undergraduate science course an appropriate place to discuss controversial ethical issues? Why or why not?

What (if anything) is the purpose of discussing controversial ethical issues in this type of environment?

Given the information in the case, does it seem like Prof. Smith's lecture is well suited to achieve that purpose?

2. What counts as "*improperly* advocating one's personal beliefs or opinions" in a classroom setting? Is there a clear difference between advocacy and showing students the costs associated with the various positions and/or arguments for them? As things are described in the case, did Prof. Smith cross that line?

When (if ever) is it appropriate for an instructor to advocate for a particular side when lecturing about controversial ethical issues (e.g. animal rights, abortion, sexual orientation, capital punishment, or world poverty)?

If an instructor has formed a strong opinion on a controversial issue that she takes to be of great importance, is it ethical for her to portray herself as remaining neutral about that issue when discussing it in class?

3. Are there any relevant differences with regard to these issues when the controversies are about empirical or other "purely factual" questions (e.g. those about evolution, the existence of man-made global warming, or those about various aspects of U.S. History)?

4. How should we respond to student concerns about being made uncomfortable by class discussions or lectures? How should we respond to student concerns about instructor bias? What should the Department Chair or Dean say or do in response to these student complaints?