Professionals have ethical obligation

By DWAIN BUNTING

Dr. Dwain Bunting is Midwest director and ethics committee chair for the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists. He is also director, rumint marketing and technical support, for ADM Animal Health & Nutrition, Quincy, Ill.

BY definition, an individual's ethics is a reflection of his or her principles, morals and/or beliefs. Professional ethics simply means that learned professionals in a given field have an ethical obligation to their employer, industry and clients. In most technical fields, professionals typically have the right to determine the details of how their work will be performed. However, their professional peers have important roles in setting the standards by which to judge the quality of their work and their ethical behavior. Thus, it follows that many professional organizations develop and practice under "codes of ethics" or "codes of conduct" that help define and/or enforce proper behavior. Generally, each code represents the formalizing of real-world experience into a principle or rule. Ethics codes are basically the distillation of the social, technical and business culture of the trade. An organization's codes are adopted by its membership as members pledge to adhere to the rules. Many technical professions also require extended formal training at institutions that specialize in the knowledge of that profession and that may recognize specific expertise through licensure and certification.

Across North America, formal training in the animal sciences is not particularly uniform and simply cannot address the myriad of professional roles an animal scientist might occupy. Consequently, professional organizations in the animal sciences have key roles to play in both defining professional behavior and in transferring technical expertise through time.

Educational process

At any point in time, one's ethical viewpoint is going to be the product of educational background and experience. The more technical knowledge and professional experience acquired, the more ethical one's behavior is likely to be. Young professionals must learn that having a naturally upright character is simply not enough to guarantee ethical behavior. To practice animal science in a consistently ethical manner, the technical, business and social aspects of the professional environment must be fully understood. Although our formal education is important, the vast majority of the knowledge and experience that will form the foundation of one's professional behavior will come from his or her work experience, continuing education in technical meetings and involvement in industry and professional organizations. In the information age, there are many avenues for becoming more technically knowledgeable. However, it is one's interactions with colleagues and professional peers that will be used to determine what should be known and how it should be practiced.

Economic value

There are virtually no downsides to belonging to a professional organization with a defined professional code. These organizations provide professional identity, demonstrate to client groups a commitment to high standards of practice, professional behavior and responsibility and provide a gauge for professional self-evaluation. Many animal science professionals see increasing value now and in the future in certifying their expertise and ethical behavior. This desire obviously tracks closely with rapidly increasing emphasis on certification of all elements of the food supply chain, from the farm gate to the consumer.

Professional certification

For practicing animal scientists, The American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists (ARPAS):

• Provides exam-based certification;
• Promotes and verifies continuing education, and
• Commits its members to a code of ethics.

The primary goal of ARPAS is well described in its vision statement: "To be recognized as the place to go for certified professionals who can provide excellence in science-based information and are pledged to high ethical standards -- to serve producers, industry and all others desiring professional information on animal sciences." ARPAS was founded by and continues to be affiliated with the principal animal professional societies, although it is now a separate organization. ARPAS registers and certifies professional animal scientists in a number of species and product areas. In addition, ARPAS provides a higher-level certification (Board Certification) in specific discipline areas, such as nutrition. Current membership of ARPAS is roughly two-thirds private sector (consultants and companies) and one-third public sector (universities, extensions and government agencies). ARPAS maintains a web site (www.arpas.org) that provides full details on the function, composition and benefits of the organization. Aside from its benefits to its individual members, ARPAS should be viewed as a key resource for companies and institutions seeking certified animal science professionals.

Code of ethics

The ARPAS code of ethics defines 21 precepts that primarily address appropriate professional conduct. In addition to promoting good stewardship, advancement of the profession and collegiality, the ARPAS code also addresses stickier scientific and business issues such as fiduciary responsibility to client groups, confidentiality, conflict of interest and competitive fairness. The ARPAS code also defines the review procedures and actions/steps involved in cases of ethical misconduct. Although complaints of professional misconduct are decidedly rare in the animal sciences, the willingness of the organization to police the conduct of its members is an important value component of the membership. The complete code of ethics is available on the ARPAS web site.

Final thoughts

Modern animal agriculture, like all segments of society, is becoming increasingly complex. Larger and more sophisticated producers, increased government regulations and greater public scrutiny of animal agriculture are all factors that will continue to push practicing professionals to establish accountability through registry and certification programs. In addition, rapidly emerging scientific advances, increasingly complex business arrangements and practices and a global marketplace will constantly force animal scientists to refine the ethical principles on which they base their professional behavior. Collectively, animal science professionals must develop a clear vision of what must be accomplished in the future, if the industry is to be economically, environmentally and ethically sustainable. However, each animal scientist, producer, consumer or other stakeholder has a different concept of how that end is reached. The trained or refined ethic of the professional animal scientist must function as his/her conscious in reconciling these sometimes competing interests. In the animal sciences, ARPAS continues to have a leading role in the evolution, teaching and sharing of professional ethics.