The Bioethics Symposium titled “A scientist’s guide to approaching bioethics” was held at the joint annual meeting of the American Society of Animal Science, American Dairy Science Association, and the Canadian Society of Animal Science in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, July 12 to 16, 2009. The purpose of the symposium was to help animal scientists come to terms with the importance of grappling with bioethical issues in animal agriculture and to provide a practical approach to logically identify, discuss, and evaluate ethical issues they encounter.

The presentation by Stricklin (2009) set the stage for the symposium by making the case that animal agriculture must come to grips with the public sentiment that considers animals as “subjects of a life” and worthy of consideration and care. However, this same public wishes to continue using animal products and, therefore, is relying on animal scientists and producers to develop ethics of care and assurance schemes that provide the animals we use for human purposes with a good quality of life. Addressing the ethical implications of our treatment of animals is ultimately compatible with the goals of animal scientists and producers because these actions promote animal agriculture systems that are socially sustainable.

The talk by Schillo (2009) segued into the need for scientists to critically evaluate the perspectives that underlie our approaches to understanding ethical issues related to animals, including those used in agriculture. For example, the paradigms we use to understand nature and biology may not be the right approaches to use when attempting to understand ethical issues. Further, the answer at which we arrive when looking at a problem from a biological perspective may not be the same answer we get when we tackle the problem from an ethical perspective. Scientists must learn to recognize when there are incompatibilities between biological and ethical answers to their research questions. In such cases, the public may place more weight on the ethical rather than on the scientific answer or may at the least require that the scientist understand and explain the ethical implications of their biological answer.

The presentation by Croney (Croney and Anthony, 2010) concluded the symposium with a practical method that scientists can use to analyze ethical issues. Ethical accounting processes developed for the biomedical field provide a framework for making ethical decisions that combines factual information with socio-ethical concerns. A specific example of these processes called the ethical matrix was presented along with an illustrative case study that demonstrated the application of the matrix to an ethical problem. The ethical deliberation framework used in the matrix relies on 3 common moral denominators (i.e., respect for well-being, respect for autonomy, and respect for justice) and assumes that our shared morality provides a basis for framing and addressing bioethical issues. Although the use of these accounting processes does not provide simple answers to the many and diverse ethical problems that face animal agriculture, the processes do provide a framework for democratic discourse about complex ethical issues that can lead to viable solutions.

Animal scientists are often uncomfortable discussing ethical issues; however, the public is becoming increasingly concerned and vocal about the ethical implications of animal agriculture. To address public concerns, scientists must learn to recognize ethical issues in animal agriculture, as well as be able to identify incompatibilities between scientific and ethical answers to research questions or production practices. By learning to analyze ethical issues in a logical way, scientists can be better prepared to discuss issues critical to animal agriculture in ways that balance factual information with ethical concerns and, therefore, directly address public concerns.

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