

Hopkins should stop using live animals for surgical training

By Barbara Wasserman

March 20, 2008

They have disappeared from more than 90 percent of U.S. medical schools. They are no longer used in training programs by the American College of Surgeons. And the American Medical Student Association now strongly recommends that they be replaced by modern alternatives.

So why is the [Johns Hopkins University](#) School of Medicine the last of the top 20-ranked medical schools in America still using live animals to train its students?

As a proud graduate of the medical school - one of the nation's best - I am hoping Hopkins will improve upon its excellent reputation by ending this cruel and outdated practice.

Despite the availability of non-animal alternatives, Hopkins continues to use live pigs in its third-year surgery clerkship multiple times throughout the school year. A standard lab involves anesthetizing the pigs, followed by students practicing surgical techniques on the animals. After the class, the animals are killed.

Pigs are sensitive, social animals capable of feeling stress, fear and pain. Reports from other medical schools have described how some animals have regained consciousness during painful procedures or died during these labs. This is not only traumatic for medical students, it is also unnecessary for their training. (A recent editorial in The Johns Hopkins News-Letter argued that live animals should not be used for purely educational purposes and called on the school to stop killing pigs in the name of medical education.)

I have my own negative memories from participating in a live animal lab when I attended Hopkins. Now, after decades as a practicing physician, I can say with certainty that participating in this lab did not make me a better doctor. Rather, it reinforced my belief that a doctor's first duty is to "do no harm" - regardless of who or what is on the operating table.

Fortunately, medical schools today have a wide variety of humane alternatives to choose from. Lifelike interactive simulators and various surgery platforms can train students in endoscopic and laparoscopic surgery, producing better skills without harming patients or animals. Students can use a variety of models that mimic skin and subcutaneous fat to learn how to suture, tie knots and manipulate tissue.

Over the past two years, more than a dozen medical schools have ended their live animal programs, and all nine medical schools opening between 2007 and 2009 do not include animals in their curricula. Only 10 of the 154 U.S. allopathic and osteopathic medical schools still offer live animal labs, and only five of these still use animals to teach surgery skills.

In fact, the American College of Surgeons no longer uses live animals in any of its training programs, and it promotes the use of non-animal surgical training tools. And in 2007, the American Medical Student Association passed a resolution strongly encouraging the replacement of live animal laboratories with non-animal alternatives.

It's time for Hopkins to join the ranks of other top medical schools that have established an improved standard of medical education. A future physician's first hands-on experiences should be life-affirming - not traumatizing.

Dr. Barbara Wasserman, an [Ellicott City](#) resident, is a member of the American College of Physicians, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine and the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Her e-mail is drwasserman@live.com.

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