

Conscientious Objection in the Classroom

Colleges and Universities

PHYSICIANS COMMITTEE FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE

5100 WISCONSIN AVE., N.W., SUITE 404 • WASHINGTON, DC 20016
PHONE (202) 686-2210 • FAX (202) 686-2216 • PCRM@PCRM.ORG • WWW.PCRM.ORG

About Dissection

Dissection was introduced into education in the 1920s as a way of studying anatomy, biology, physiology, and the theory of evolution. It was during a time when people were not so aware—or not at all aware—of issues involving the environment and animal life.

Animals who are dissected include mice, rats, worms, cats, rabbits, fetal pigs, birds, dogs, and fish. They come from breeding facilities, slaughterhouses, their natural habitats, pet stores, local pounds, and even animal dealers and thieves. Most are killed and “processed” at biological supply companies.

Why Be Concerned?

- Animals used for dissection can have a miserable existence in the process of being captured, transported, and ultimately killed.
- Animals used in dissection are often embalmed with formaldehyde, a chemical preservative linked to cancer of the throat, lungs, and nasal passages. Formaldehyde can also damage the eyes, cause asthma attacks and bronchitis, and severely irritate the skin. So far, people can only speculate how inhaling and touching formaldehyde affects the long-term health of students and teachers.
- Dissection has become big business. About six million animals are dissected in U.S. schools each year. The nation’s largest biological supply company alone grosses \$25 to \$30 million annually in sales of animals for dissection.
- Biology courses are intended to expose students to useful concepts and stimulate an interest in the life sciences, but dissections can interfere with these goals. Dissection devalues life and teaches insensitivity by treating living beings as disposable objects.
- The right to refuse to dissect has been established in many schools across the country because so many students have refused to participate. But there always has been someone at every school who was the *first* person to say *no* to dissection. At your school, you may be that person. It is not

always easy to set a precedent, but it is well worth it to take that first step. One of the most important things you can do is assert your right to an education which does not violate your principles. Many medical schools, such as Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Columbia Universities, have eliminated the animal laboratories once used for teaching. Please contact our office for a list of medical schools that do not use animal labs to teach.

What You Can Do

- As early as possible in the semester, find out if you will be expected to perform or watch a dissection. Do not wait until the last minute. If a dissection lab is planned, tell your professor now that you will not want to participate. With enough time, you and your professor should be able to agree on another project.
- When talking with your professor, calmly and plainly state your reasons for refusing to dissect. Emphasize that you cannot comfortably participate in dissection because of the values and beliefs you hold. Ask your professor to respond as soon as possible to your request for a lab or other exercise without dissection. If he or she refuses your request, take your concern to the appropriate department head or dean.
- Suggest alternatives that will allow you to gain the same knowledge as your classmates who participate in the dissection. Most students do not accept watching other students dissect as an alternative, as this puts them in the position of participating in the use of animals as educational tools. You should expect to be tested on the same material as the other students, provided it does not include a dissected animal, and you should not be penalized for doing an alternative project.
- It might help to put your statements into writing, either to help you speak with your professor, or to give directly to him or her to read before you discuss the matter. If you give a statement to your professor, keep a copy of it for future reference.

- You might want to involve other students who oppose dissection and approach your professor or department head as a group. Use the school media, especially the campus newspaper and radio station, as a forum for discussion. Introduce the ethical issues surrounding dissection at student government meetings. Most students will support the right to not dissect.

For additional information, please refer to PCRM's fact sheets entitled, "Dissection Alternatives" and "Cost Analysis of Dissection Versus Nonanimal Teaching Methods." If you are facing a live animal laboratory, please contact PCRM for supplementary information.

Additional Resources

A booklet, *Objecting to Dissection*, counseling, and alternative loan information are available from:

National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS)
53 W. Jackson Blvd.
Chicago, IL 60604-3795
Dissection Hotline: 800-922-FROG
www.navs.org

A catalog of alternatives, *Beyond Dissection*, is available from:

Ethical Science Education Coalition
333 Washington St., Suite 850
Boston, MA 02108
617-367-9143
www.neavs.org

Additional information on dissection is available from:

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
501 Front St.
Norfolk, VA 23510
757-622-7382
www.peta-online.org

Alternative loans are also available from:

Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)
2100 L St., N.W.
Washington, DC 20037
301-258-3042