



## SIR JAMES DUNN ANIMAL WELFARE CENTRE *Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island*



PROMOTING ANIMAL WELFARE THROUGH RESEARCH, SERVICE, AND EDUCATION



UNIVERSITY  
of Prince Edward  
ISLAND



### ANIMAL WELFARE IN PRACTICE WITH DR. TASHA CLARK



A new feature in our newsletters highlights how veterinarians are incorporating animal welfare into their daily practice. Meet Dr. Tasha Clark, PEIVMA animal welfare liaison and AVC alumni. As a doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) on Prince Edward Island, Dr. Clark believes that veterinarians can help owners proactively improve their pets' welfare by making dental care a low-stress experience.

Every pet starts with a full set of teeth, and just like people, dental care is necessary. The earlier owners start brushing their pets' teeth, the better. They can begin by gently getting their pet used to having their mouth and teeth touched when they are a puppy or kitten. Aim to brush their teeth at least a few times a week, and the benefits will last a lifetime.

If brushing is too difficult for your pet, you can explore other dental health products by visiting the Veterinary Oral Health Council's website at <https://vohc.org/>

**Check out this helpful Fear Free video for brushing teeth:**  
<https://fearfreepets.com/creating-a-fear-free-toothbrushing-experience/>



# 2025 WEBINAR SERIES

The 10th annual SJDAWC webinar series covered animal welfare issues in small mammals kept as pets, such as rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters and rodents. The series included three speakers covering important topics ranging from day-to-day care, behaviour, and common health disorders in these animals. We are grateful for funding from the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada to support the series.



## WE WELCOME FEEDBACK!

Please contact us at [animalwelfare@upei.ca](mailto:animalwelfare@upei.ca) to receive the newsletter (in full colour) by email and to be added to our email list for occasional upcoming events.

To learn how you can support the Centre, please go to [awc.upei.ca](http://awc.upei.ca) or write to:

The Sir James Dunn  
Animal Welfare Centre  
Atlantic Veterinary College  
University of Prince Edward Island  
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Charlottetown, PEI, Canada  
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*All donations are tax deductible.*

## APRIL 17 | WEBINAR 1

### ***SMALL RODENTS, BIG NEEDS: UNDERSTANDING RODENT BEHAVIOUR TO ENHANCE ANIMAL WELFARE***



In the first webinar, Dr. Lee Niel, associate professor at the University of Guelph, discussed the pros and cons of keeping rodents as pets. Rats, mice, and gerbils can make good family pets but there are some unique challenges to their care.

Dr. Niel explained that rodents can be engaging pets, they can be gently handled by their people, and it is possible to provide them with adequate enclosures that meet their needs.

One of the biggest challenges with keeping rodents as pets is finding veterinary care, as not all veterinarians are willing to take them as patients. These animals also have unique needs and require suitable environments that allow them to express their natural behaviours. To illustrate this idea, Dr. Niel used an example of a gerbil who displays abnormal and highly repetitive digging behaviour, which tells its caretakers that something in their environment is missing. In this case, the gerbil needed a burrow to help it feel safe.

Ultimately, keeping these pets happy and healthy requires ongoing commitment from their caretakers and an understanding of their species-specific needs. Dr. Niel also encouraged more veterinarians and veterinary students to consider providing health care for these animals.

To view previous webinars, please visit our YouTube channel at [www.upei.ca/youtube/awc](http://www.upei.ca/youtube/awc)





## APRIL 22 | WEBINAR 2

### **SETTING RABBITS AND YOUR CLIENTS UP FOR SUCCESS: KEY ELEMENTS OF RABBIT BEHAVIOUR AND WELFARE**



In the second webinar, Dr. Carol Tinga discussed important considerations for pet rabbit care. Dr. Tinga recently completed her PhD on rabbit welfare at the University of Guelph where she is currently a postdoctoral scholar.

Dr. Tinga started by explaining that many owners are unaware of behaviours that are important to rabbits, including the ability to run and hop over long distances (their housing should accommodate at least 3 hops), standing up on their hind limbs, digging, and hiding. Appropriate environments should allow rabbits to express these behaviours, which means that many small hutches often sold for rabbits are not suitable for their long-term care.

Dr. Tinga described several factors that cause stress in rabbits, such as inappropriate handling, an inadequate environment, lack of companionship, and exposure to new environments, such as the vet clinic. As prey animals, rabbits can become very fearful if they are picked up off the ground, making it difficult for people to handle them appropriately. Although rabbits can make good pets, their caretakers and veterinarians should strive to understand and accommodate their unique behaviours.

## APRIL 29 | WEBINAR 3

### **RABBITS, GUINEA PIGS, AND HAMSTERS UNDER PRIMARY VETERINARY CARE: REVEALING THE VETCOMPASS PERSPECTIVE ON DEMOGRAPHY AND COMMON DISORDERSE**



The final webinar was presented by Dr. Dan O'Neill, associate professor of companion animal epidemiology at the Royal Veterinary College. Dr. O'Neill described a unique tool that he and others use to track and understand common disorders of rabbits, guinea pigs, and hamsters. This tool, called VetCompass, collects health data from a wide range of companion animals across 25% of veterinary clinics in the UK.

According to VetCompass, the most common disorders in rabbits appear to be related to husbandry, such as overgrown nails, dental issues associated with inappropriate diets, and obesity.

Whereas hamsters are more likely to be afflicted with ringworm and eye problems that may be related to injuries while burrowing. Gerbils, on the other hand, are most commonly diagnosed with “wet tail”, a catch-all term that describes gastrointestinal and incontinence issues.

Dr. O'Neill was also excited to share the average life expectancy of these species when they are kept as pets, as this can help veterinarians and caretakers make important decisions about their care. In the UK, pet rabbits can live up to five years old, hamsters around four years old, and gerbils can live to the ripe old age of 1.75 years.



# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SJDAWC

## NEW GRADUATE STUDENT AT THE SJDAWC



Wenxuan Ma joined the Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre in September 2024, to start her master of science (MSc) degree. Wenxuan is from China and completed her bachelor's degree in psychology with a minor in biology at UPEI.

Wenxuan's MSc research project explores the natural variations of sleep stages and how they affect cognitive abilities in dairy calves. Sleep is increasingly being recognized as an important component of any animal's welfare, yet it remains relatively underexplored in livestock. It is essential for dairy calves to know how to interact with their environment

to respond appropriately to the management and environmental changes they will face over their lifetime.

By studying how different sleep patterns influence cognitive functions like memory or reaction to novelty, this research aims to inform farm management practices that promote healthier, more resilient animals.

Wenxuan is supervised by Drs. Katy Proudfoot and Cathy Ryan, and her research is supported by a Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Discovery Grant.

## LAWLESS BENEFITS FROM 2024–2025 TRAVEL AWARD

Jillian Lawless received a SJDAWC student travel award for an external rotation to Meru, Kenya. The work in Meru was deeply rooted in improving animal welfare due to its direct link to increased milk production. In fact, 100% of the dairy cases they attended involved an animal welfare component. The most significant impact they had on the communities was through their informational sessions.

They filled backyards, living rooms, and churches with farmers eager to learn about essential dairy cattle management practices. A significant focus was placed on enhancing animal welfare and comfort by ensuring dry stalls with proper shelter, providing adequate nutrition, emphasizing vaccination, and maintaining appropriate stall designs—all crucial factors in cultivating healthier, more productive cows.

Three walk-in clinics were held in the Mabaaria, Naari, and Nkando communities, where they treated hundreds of cows. Using chutes, they administered deworming treatments and vaccinations against rabies, anthrax, and bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). In Kenya, where most farms consist of just one or two cows, disease prevention is crucial to sustaining the livelihoods of these farmers and the health of the animals.



*Photo: Second from left, Jillian Lawless climbing to the top of the vaccination chute to administer injections to a cow.*

“This experience has had a profound impact on me as a veterinarian and has shaped the way I will advocate for animal welfare throughout my career.”

—Jillian Lawless, Class of 2025



# PROJECTS FUNDED IN 2025

Each year, the SJDAWC provides funding to support projects that aim to improve the lives of animals. For the 2025 cycle, six projects were funded, covering diverse topics related to animal welfare. To learn more about this funding opportunity, visit our website at [awc.upei.ca/grant-competition/](http://awc.upei.ca/grant-competition/)

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF VETERINARIANS IN MULTI-SPECIES WELFARE

*L. Cusack, K. Proudfoot*



The aims of this new integrated project are to investigate community perceptions on multi-species welfare and understand the relationship between the public's values about different species and the perception of the role of veterinarians in wildlife welfare.

## MEDICAL AND SURGICAL CARE OF HOMELESS SMALL ANIMALS

*A. Ogilvie, P. Foley, R. MacLean, M. MacLean, L. Ellis*



This renewed service project will identify homeless animals who require medical or surgical care, develop treatment plans, and to provide care. Following care, these animals are adopted by community members. This project is also supported by the PEI Humane Society.

## NEUTERING FERAL CATS OF PEI WITH THE PEI CAT ACTION TEAM (CAT)

*M. Carr, P. Foley*



This renewed service project improves the health and well-being of feral cats, protects local wildlife, and brings the community together to help animals. By reducing the number of feral cats, they can create a more humane and balanced environment for both humans and animals.

## EVALUATION OF TEACHING CATTLE AND HORSE WELFARE USING AUTOMATED AI TECHNOLOGY

*J. Spears, B. Crane, K. Stewart, J. Knight*



This new service project aims to employ a system of cameras and Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven software to provide continuous monitoring of the cows and horses used for teaching at the Atlantic Veterinary College. The data collected will benefit future animal welfare research and regulatory decision-making at AVC and the Canadian Council on Animal Care.

## IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF ULTRASONIC NOISE FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF ZOO ANIMAL WELFARE

*P. Bernard, J. Spears, L. Bigelow, E. Pope*



The goal of this new research project is to gain a better understanding of the presence of ultrasonic noise within the zoo environment. Various exhibits will be systematically surveyed using a specialized microphone and sources of noise within the hearing range of the animal occupants determined.

## USING PHYSIOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL MEASURES TO DEFINE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES FOR PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOUR

*K. Overall, C. Martin, B. Montelpare, J. Vernick*



This new research project seeks support to analyze stored laboratory samples from puppies to understand when normal and abnormal behaviours diverge, and to establish the physiological costs of the development of behavioural pathology.

For more information about previously funded projects, please visit our website: [awc.upei.ca/list-of-all-funded-projects/](http://awc.upei.ca/list-of-all-funded-projects/)

## AVC VETERINARY STUDENTS SHINE AT ANIMAL WELFARE ASSESSMENT CONTEST

Six veterinary students from AVC showcased their skills and knowledge at the 2024 Animal Welfare Assessment Contest. Hosted by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the event took place at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls in November.

Competing against peers from universities across North America, the students, split into two teams, brought home three top awards in the veterinary division.

Team 1, composed of Anna Varty (AVC Class of 2027), Ciara Richter (AVC Class of 2028), and Mia Vargas (AVC Class of 2028); and Team 2, featuring Ainsley Monchesky (AVC Class of 2028), Brooklyn Kenny (AVC Class of 2028), and Jocelyn Childers (AVC Class of 2028), earned first place overall, third place overall, and first place in the team scenario.

The contest involved individual and team assessments of animal welfare scenarios, including those for penguins in zoos, laboratory Xenopus (African clawed frogs), breeding dogs, and lactating dairy cows on a compost-bedded pack. The students evaluated different scenarios, defended their decisions in oral presentations, and proposed actionable recommendations for improvement.



Back row (L-R): Ciara Richter, Anna Varty, Mia Vargas  
Front row (L-R): Brooklyn Kenny, Jocelyn Childers, Ainsley Monchesky

“This competition was an incredible opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to real-world situations.”

—Brooklyn Kenny, Class of 2028

“It was amazing to connect with professionals and like-minded peers who are passionate about animal welfare,” added Jocelyn Childers.

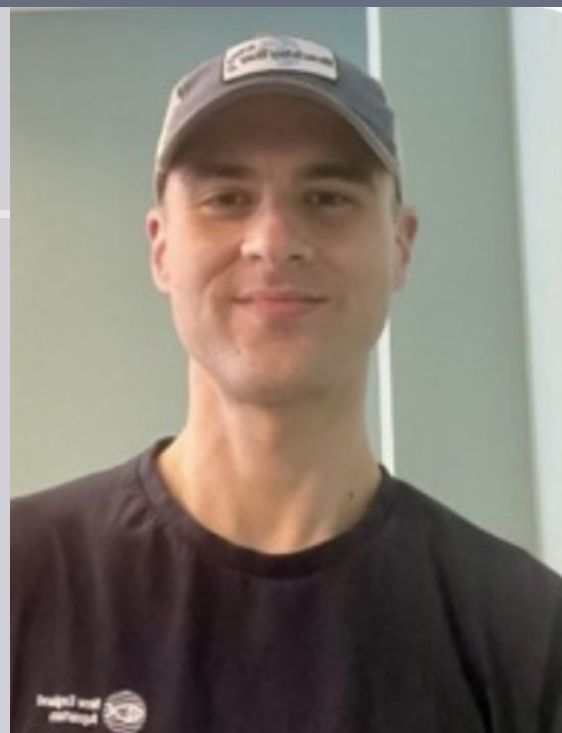
The students’ successes were supported by generous funding from the Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre, the AVMA, and the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare. Special thanks are extended to their coach, Dr. Katy Proudfoot, and third-year students Catherine LeBlond, Gabrielle Doiron, Tsukasa Iwamoto, Madison King, Abigail Penney-Wiseman, and Sinead Riordon for their invaluable guidance during preparations.

# AWARDS

## 2025 SJDAWC VETERINARY SUMMER AWARD

**Congratulations to Jon Klymchuk, AVC Class of 2028, for receiving the 2025 SJDAWC Veterinary Summer Research Award.** Jon's project will assess the management practices and use of preventative medicine in Standardbred broodstock in PEI through an in-person questionnaire to owners. He is honoured to have received this award and looks forward to working with his supervisor Dr. Jennifer Burns.

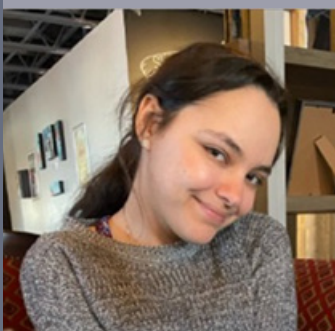
Jon will also travel to Spokane, Washington in August to attend the 2025 Veterinary Scholars Symposium where he will represent the SJDAWC by presenting a poster on his research.



Jon Klymchuk

## 2025–2026 ANIMAL WELFARE STUDENT TRAVEL AWARDS

Four students have been awarded \$500 each to assist them with the travel for an external rotation related to animal welfare during their fourth year.



**Yasmin Scott** will participate in an external rotation at the ASPCA Veterinary Forensic Science Centre in Gainesville, Florida.



**Carissa Grove** will travel to Kenya for a rotation in small holder dairy health management.



**Gabrielle Doiron** is excited to secure a rotation with the Zoo de Granby in Quebec.



**Emily Czerwinski** will travel to Kenya to participate in a rotation to small holder livestock health management.

*Safe travels everyone and we cannot wait to hear about your rotations when you return!*





## THANK-YOU TO THE CHRISTOFOR AND THE SIR JAMES DUNN FOUNDATIONS

We gratefully acknowledge the sustained financial support of **The Christofor and The Sir James Dunn Foundations**, without which the SJDAWC would not exist.

We also thank Dr. Eric Butler and Ms. Suzanne Rocca-Butler, and the many generous organizations, individuals, veterinary hospitals, and other businesses—too numerous to mention—that have made donations in memory of a beloved pet. You can find a list of our donors on our webpage: [awc.upei.ca/supporting-the-centre/](http://awc.upei.ca/supporting-the-centre/)

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