A special case

The Maine Campus

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We at the Maine Campus breathed a collective sigh of relief last week when President Howard R. Neville announced that Zen Buddhist Michelle Earltinez could keep the animals used in her lab experiments.

We were relieved because, having followed the progress of the case, we expected a negative ruling.

In overruling his vice president for Academic Affairs, James Clark, and the department chairman of animal and veterinary science, John Wolford, Neville has shown sensitivity.

But the issue was a potentially explosive one. The big, bad bureaucratic system, with all its rules and regulations, against a sole student standing up for her religious beliefs.

In a nation keen on underdogs, it isn't difficult to imagine which direction public opinion would sway if the decision had been left intact.

And the University's public image is one of the more important concerns of administrators. The shake-up in UMO's public relations program is evidence of that.

This case was beginning to jab at the University by receiving coverage in the state's two most widely read newspapers. In a budget request year, the last thing a state-funded institution needs is bad publicity.

We've realized the need for UMO to abide by HEW regulations concerning the care of lab animals. But we've also felt the burden of proof was on UMO to show why Earltinez shouldn't be allowed to keep her animals, providing she gave them proper care. Our disappointment in Wolford and Clark's rigidity was heightened when an HEW spokesman said UMO administrators were spewing "hogwash" in denying the student's religious requests.

Neville's overruling of two lower administrators underscores the wafer-thin rationale behind denying the variance in the first place.

Both Clark and Wolford were caught with their pants down and Neville's decision was an attempt to pull them back up.

Neville wrote that Earltinez's "reasons of religion and philosophy are sincere and conscientious."

His appraisal was correct and his manner in handling the situation earns him high marks.

Important decisions involving complex issues involve more than the black and white aspects which the public is most familiar with.

But while Neville's consideration of the case may have included more than concern for the welfare of a student, his decision deserves applause. The simple fact is—he could have ruled otherwise.