

Everyday ethics

THIS series gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute to discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise in veterinary practice. Each month, a case scenario is presented, followed by discussion of some of the issues involved. In addition, a possible way forward is suggested; however, there is rarely a cut-and-dried answer in such cases, and readers may wish to suggest an alternative approach. This month's dilemma, entitled 'Suspected organised dog fight', is presented and discussed by Annie Kerr. Readers with comments to contribute are invited to send them as soon as possible, so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue. Discussion of the dilemma 'Dog needs a new home?', which was published in the March issue of *In Practice*, appears on page 199.

The series is being coordinated by Siobhan Mullan, of the University of Bristol. It is hoped it will provide a framework that will help practices find solutions when facing similar dilemmas.

Annie Kerr graduated from Murdoch University, Australia, in 1999, and worked in veterinary practice in Australia and England before accepting a clinical training scholarship at Bristol in 2006. She holds the RCVS certificate in animal welfare science, ethics and law.

SUSPECTED ORGANISED DOG FIGHT

You are working as a locum in a small animal practice on a busy Saturday morning. The last case of the morning is a two-year-old Staffordshire bull terrier crossbred dog with wounds to its head and neck, which you suspect may have occurred during an organised dog fight. How do you proceed with this case?

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Annie Kerr comments: The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 states that veterinarians are required by law to be sufficiently familiar with and comply with the relevant legislation, and in doing so to treat all patients of whatever species humanely, with respect and with welfare as the primary consideration. A vet must promote good animal ownership and must also give due consideration to the client's concerns and wishes where these do not conflict with the patient's welfare. The RCVS governs the work of its members and enforces these guiding principles.

Section 8 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 states that it is an offence to promote or in any way participate in a dog fight, whether that is by being present at, gambling on or arranging the event. The RCVS Advice note number 20, entitled

'Client confidentiality – reporting alleged criminal activity', states that, in general, there is no duty to report alleged criminal activity. Furthermore, client confidentiality should only be breached in circumstances where the vet believes that issues relating to animal welfare or public interest override the aforementioned clause.

It is important to consider the interests of the animal(s) involved, the client, the veterinarian and the wider community when faced with such a scenario in practice. For every injured fighting animal that veterinarians examine, there may be many more dogs in a similar, or worse, condition. Two of the five freedoms may be compromised as a result of dog fighting: the freedom from pain, injury and disease, as well as the freedom from fear and distress. The freedom from hunger, thirst and discomfort will depend on the animal's husbandry and management. The freedom to exhibit normal behaviour may be a contentious issue as it could be argued that aggressive activity is a natural part of the dog's behavioural repertoire. However, the training and conditioning of dogs creates an artificial environment in which animals are forced to fight for human entertainment.

The cost to a client of reporting suspected dog fighting activity may be criminal prosecution, financial penalties, loss of potential earnings and negative publicity. The reporting veterinarian may be required to document and formally present their evidence for the justice system, which may be both challenging and stressful. Also, the time taken to prepare evidence for a legal case may be at the expense of other veterinary work, with an associated loss of income. However, a vet reporting suspected dog fighting activity may take solace in the fact that they are acting as an advocate for the animals. The wider community may benefit from the reporting of dog fighting as it enforces legislation created by their elected parliamentary leaders that attempts to safeguard the welfare of animals that may otherwise suffer.

POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

In the case of suspected dog fight activity, the veterinarian should thoroughly document the nature, extent and severity of the animal's injuries and, if possible, seek a second opinion from a colleague. A comprehensive record of the animal's history and client information is also critical. Once these first-hand notes have been taken, the veterinarian may wish to contact the RCVS for further guidance and assistance before contacting the relevant local authority agency.

Any comments?

Readers with views to contribute on 'Suspected organised dog fight' should e-mail them to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk so that they can be considered for publication in the next issue, or fax comments to 020 7908 6329. The deadline for receipt of comments is Wednesday, April 22. Please limit contributions to 200 words.

COMMENTS ON LAST MONTH'S DILEMMA: DOG NEEDS A NEW HOME?

THE dilemma in the last issue concerned a vet on a home visit to treat the incessant scratching of a boxer. (*In Practice*, March 2009, volume 31, page 147). The house was infested with fleas and the owner was experiencing difficulties in caring for himself and the dog, which had recently been rehomed to him from a charity due to behavioural problems. The owner had a good relationship with the animal, but it displayed aggressive behaviour towards the vet, who had concerns for the welfare of both dog and owner. Tania Dennison commented that the dog may have benefited from being placed with an owner who provided love, food, shelter and water, and the owner's life may also have improved, as he had gained a companion. However, there were questions around the immediate wellbeing of the dog, which was apparently not being provided with exercise and preventive health measures, and the wellbeing of the owner, due to the fact that the dog's protective behaviour might prevent emergency personnel entering the house should they need to. A possible way forward would be to explore the owner's view of the potential challenges involved in looking after the dog and investigate what support the rehoming centre could provide. Together, the vet and the owner could then devise a support plan to help the owner cope.

Siobhan Mullan comments: The decision to rehome this, or perhaps any, dog to an elderly housebound man is questionable. Many everyday situations that require an ethical decision could be prevented, or at least less-

ened, if alternative actions had been taken early on. Not only could potential welfare problems be avoided, but also the angst for individuals having to make decisions where there is no clear, right course of action.

We are very familiar with the concept of preventive medicine, and this can be applied to ethical situations where prevention is also better than cure. In order to practise 'preventive ethics', information about the key actions in the background to ethical decisions needs to be considered. This is not necessarily anything new; most vets will be familiar with thinking, 'If only I'd seen this animal last week, all this could have been prevented.' But how often do we actually say it? Practising preventive ethics would encourage us to voice these sort of concerns when we believe that it will help a better course of action to occur in the future.

When the key actions in the run up to an ethical decision have been taken by us, others in our practice or our clients, the channels for communication are already open. When, as in the case of an inappropriate rehoming, the key action has been taken by an outside agency, it becomes more difficult and less obviously rewarding, but practising preventive ethics through informing the organisation of the resulting problems may be the first step in promoting change.

Have you faced a dilemma that you would like considered in a future instalment of *Everyday Ethics*? If so, e-mail a brief outline to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk

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Suspected Organised Dog Fight

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