

Comments on the dilemma in the February issue: 'Disbudding illegally?'

The dilemma in the February issue concerned a dairy goat farmer interested in becoming a client at a practice (*In Practice*, February 2010, volume 32, pages 78-79). He was told that he would be taken on as a client providing the vet undertook the disbudding of goat kids on farm, as it was a legal requirement that this was done under anaesthetic by a vet. However, the farmer did not want the additional expense and did not contact the practice again. The farm was still in business, and the vet suspected the farmer was disbudding the kids himself without anaesthesia. Kathy Anzuino commented that there were good reasons for a vet to undertake the procedure, which had been translated into law. By declining to take the farmer as a client, the vet made animal welfare the primary consideration and did not inadvertently condone an illegal practice. A possible way forward would be to find out more about the farmer's reasons for disbudding illegally, as there might be other reasons besides cost and convenience why he did not contact the practice. Although resuming discussions with the farmer might be difficult, the farm would require veterinary input eventually, thus providing an opportunity for further dialogue. If the farmer was still reluctant to disbud legally, the vet could explain that the farmer's actions meant that he or she had little choice but to report the farm. Reporting should remain a last resort, as vets were often in a position of trust and farmers should feel that they could continue to see them as part of solutions to shared concerns.

Siobhan Mullan comments: Reporting clients – or potential clients – to the authorities is inevitably a fraught business. In this case, the argument for trying to avoid any legal action was based on the possible animal welfare (and other) consequences of breaking the trust that people naturally have towards the profession. This may seem sensible, but vets should be aware that

there are some difficulties when applying a consequentialist ethical theory to these cases. In particular, vets may not always agree on the likely consequences, although research can improve their chances of estimating correctly. For example, in recent times, as a profession, vets have perhaps been seen as too 'trustworthy'. They have been, for example, accused of being in the

pockets of their clients and therefore unwilling to speak out on the welfare issues of pedigree pets. If owners perceive that vets do not have animal welfare at heart, they may be less inclined to follow advice aimed at safeguarding animal welfare. A social science evaluation may help find out if this is the case and so aid vets in taking the right actions.

In the meantime, the approach suggested by Kathy Anzuino of reporting issues, rather than people, may provide an alternative route to tread between these concerns. This approach will require careful consideration to ensure maximum benefits. It is not clear who such issues should be reported to, but the RCVS, DEFRA and the BVA could all be appropriate, depending on the circumstances. If vets choose to report an issue, then in order to have discharged their duty appropriately, it is up to them to be sure that their concerns will be actively assessed and acted upon appropriately, and not just left to gather dust.

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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