RESEARCH INVOLVING ANIMALS

You are the principal of a practice that has been asked to take on the veterinary work for a small animal breeding establishment that supplies animals to laboratories for research. Although, geographically, your practice is the least because of a concern for the safety of you and your staff. At an emotional level for many laboratories, this 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 ‘Research involving animals’, was submitted by a reader and is presented and discussed by Paul Roger. 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 ‘Vaccination with a twitch?’, which was published in the June issue of In Practice, appears on page 360.

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.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Paul Roger comments: The first consideration is whether there are the necessary skills in the practice to care for the variety and number of species that are kept in the breeding unit. If not, the work can only be undertaken if you ensure that you can employ suitably skilled clinicians or can deliver training for your own clinicians that will allow a good level of service to be offered on a 24-hour basis. Secondly, can the client afford this cost and will they be able to pay for these services? Without this guarantee, the practice may have considerable cost outlays to cover and end up facing redundancies or worse.

It might then be useful to ask whether the aims and practices of the establishment are ethically sound. For example, is it licensed and do the animals have far to travel to their end destinations? Are you satisfied that the animals’ husbandry and the management of the unit are to a very high standard, and do the aims of the establishment encourage the ‘three Rs’ (replacement, reduction and refinement) and adopt the five freedoms for the animals kept there?

If the answers to these questions are positive, then you must look at your own motivation for becoming involved. It is not satisfactory to accept a new client and further work purely because you see it as a business opportunity that can be denied to others. There are responsibilities that the practice will assume, and it is at this stage that practice staff need to be involved. Decisions that affect the ethos of the practice and the areas of staff concerns need to be established (if they have not already been taken into account) and the final decision on whether to become involved or to pass this opportunity by needs to be made after analysing the impact of this service on practice personnel.

In this particular scenario, the risk of attacks by animal rights activists needs to be taken into account, as it is unacceptable to put staff in a situation where personal physical attacks may occur. The veterinary surgeon should be able to make his or her own decision based on a factual analysis, but cannot make that decision for others, and likewise cannot alter the potential for direct action against themselves or their practice through reasoned argument with extremists in any discipline. Part of the extremists’ armament is an unwillingness to deal with reasoned discussion or to listen to cogent argument. Questions may also be raised on the perception of the current client base on this new service provision.

POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

This is an issue where the decision made must be acceptable to all staff, as it is the fundamental ethos of the practice; allowing staff to opt out of any duties towards the establishment is not likely to be practical. Ethical objections from practice staff should therefore be addressed openly, and a stakeholder analysis of the problem performed. Consideration of the interests of all parties affected may offer guidance to inform the decision on whether this new direction is appropriate for the practice within the professional ethos of the service provided to the local community.
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.

**Siobhan Mullan** works part-time in small animal practice, as well as at the University of Bristol. She holds the RCVS diploma in animal welfare science, ethics and law.

**COMMENTS ON LAST MONTH’S DILEMMA: VACCINATION WITH A TWITCH**

THE dilemma in the last issue concerned a vet who was called to give a competition horse its annual flu vaccination (*In Practice*, June 2009, volume 31, page 302). It was the final day under British Horse Society rules that the vaccination could be carried out before the horse was required to restart the course. However, the horse became extremely stressed and the vet was not able to inject it. The owner insisted that the horse was vaccinated that day by any means necessary, and the vet felt uneasy at the prospect of using a twitch. Tania Dennison commented that one useful framework was to consider the effect of any actions on each stakeholder in terms of the three principles of common morality: wellbeing, autonomy and justice. A possible way forward would be for the vet to discuss his or her concerns regarding the animal’s welfare and to talk about possible options, including allowing the horse time to calm down with the aim of gaining its trust and trying to attempt the vaccination once more. Another member of the practice might also be able to come out and help. The twitch might then be used if neither option was appropriate; however, a plan should be devised to help the horse overcome its fear of vaccinations.

**Siobhan Mullan comments:** The discussion of this case centred on the presumption that the use of a nose twitch on the horse would cause it pain. If this or other premises are incorrect, then the likelihood of making the wrong ethical decision is increased. The crucial role of scientific investigation in providing the facts on which we can overlay our values is clear. But where do we get these ‘facts’ from?

In this case, there seems remarkably little scientific evidence evaluating the effect of twitching on horses, especially considering its widespread usage and potential severity. However, it seems to have become almost universally accepted, among horse owners at least, that twitching releases endorphins that pleasurably sedate horses. Whatever the truth, it would seem that it is our duty, as individuals and as a profession that is looked to for guidance on matters of animal welfare and ethics, to ensure that we critically evaluate the available research so it can inform our actions. Where research is sparse, we have only common sense to turn to, while trying to eliminate elements of bias such as the usefulness of the procedure to us, or unwarranted anthropomorphism.