The dilemma in the February issue concerned a senior vet who hit a dog when it tried to bite him as he examined an infected wound (In Practice, February 2011, volume 33, pages 94-95). Junior staff looked on in horror but said nothing. Peter Fordyce commented that whether to act or ignore the incident should be considered; if one did decide to act, should any actions be taken ‘in-house’ or involve outside parties such as the owner? Employees that ‘whistle-blow’ might find future employment difficult, but failure to act might leave other patients of the practice vulnerable to physical abuse, and not involving the client in the decision-making process might expose those involved with the case to an accusation of a cover-up. A possible way forward would be to consider what action should be taken to address the moral offence caused by the assault, how other animals should be protected from such behaviour, the proportionality of the response, and the ethical issues surrounding paternalism relating to the owner’s involvement in the decision-making process. The RCVS guidance provided a practical approach to resolving the issue of the assault; it did not, however, address the issue of informing the client. It was therefore wise to discuss the issue of informing the client with the RCVS beforehand, particularly if the case was not proven against the vet.

While the employees who witnessed this action might feel it was inappropriate, they should consider the circumstances that drove the vet to act in this way. Clearly, the precipitating factor was the dog attempting to bite, and there are occasions when it is an instinctive reaction to strike an animal in order to prevent further attack. On this occasion, however instinctive the reaction, it would appear that the motive was revenge. The witnesses should assess whether this was typical behaviour for the vet in question. It may be that he was under stress from other factors and the dog attempting to bite him caused an uncharacteristic loss of control but, having calmed down, he is remorseful. In the latter case, the first action of the witnesses should be informing him of their distress at his behaviour, whereupon it would be appropriate for him to apologise to them and, as the dog has suffered no consequential injury, taking further action would be disproportionate. However, if this is repeated behaviour, it could be considered that he is unfit to practise and should be reported to the RCVS.

Martin Atkinson, St Martins Veterinary Clinic, West Drayton UB7 7JS
doi:10.1136/inp.d993