Comments on the dilemma in the February issue: ‘Violent vet’

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.

I read with interest the ethical dilemma presented in February’s issue. However, it did strike me that the suggested course of action bypassed a rather obvious alternative. The vet in question was ‘one of the senior partners’ and I would have therefore thought that the dilemma was merely ‘which of the other partners is this reported to?’. At no point was it suggested that talking to the vet concerned was appropriate. As a manager in practice, I often find that situations escalate to an unnecessary level due to a lack of face-to-face communication. In this society of form-filling and procedure so beloved by governing bodies, it is easy to forget that nothing really replaces a frank discussion and this often reveals a bigger picture which may have a bearing on a situation. While I do not remotely condone the actions described or disagree with the suggestions made, I do wonder whether a first step should have been to speak to the vet to see if there is any reason why he took the course of action he did – it may be that he needs help rather than reprimand.

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