In Practice

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, ‘Irresponsible dog ownership’, 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 ‘Regulation breach on farm’, which was published in the July/August issue of In Practice, appears on page 423.

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.

Paul Roger is a past-president of the Sheep Veterinary Society. After 25 years in general practice, he established a referral practice and consultancy service in farm animal health and production, based in Reeth, North Yorkshire. He has a particular interest in sheep and their welfare, and holds the RCVS diploma in sheep health and production and the certificate in animal welfare science, ethics and law.

Irresponsible dog ownership

Your neighbours buy two beagles and house them in a purpose-built compound. During the week, both occupants leave for work early and return in the evening, and they are often away at weekends. A paid dog walker exercises the dogs for about 50 minutes a day during the week and spends a further 10 minutes feeding them and cleaning up. Before and after being walked, the dogs bay periodically throughout the day, which is starting to get on your nerves. At weekends the dogs are not walked, but they are allowed to run around a terraced garage roof. How should you proceed?

Issues to consider

This problem exemplifies the lack of forethought and planning taken by many people when they decide to become dog owners.

People frequently choose which dog to buy based on factors such as its size, shape, smell, colour, coat type or responsiveness, but selection should be a painstaking process, with consideration of breed characteristics and how a breed’s needs can be satisfied by the owner.

To satisfy a dog’s basic needs, the five freedoms must be met. These stipulate that an animal should be able to express normal behaviour, as well as being free from: hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury and disease; and fear and distress.

In this case, the limited exercise the dogs receive, which is compounded by the owners’ failure to walk their dogs on weekends, means that the dogs are unable to express their normal behaviour.

Furthermore, although the dietary and physical health needs of the animals might be satisfied in the short term, they may well be compromised in the long term due to restraints on the dogs’ behaviour and the potential for them to experience fear and discomfort when confined within the compound.

The failure of the owners to exercise their dogs at weekends also contravenes guidelines published by the Companion Animal Welfare Council. Its leaflet on the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs states: ‘Make sure your dog has enough to do so that it does not become distressed or bored’. In relation to the housing of dogs, it adds, ‘Make sure your dog has opportunities to spend enough time with people and friendly dogs so that it is less likely to become lonely or bored’ and ‘Make sure that your dog is never left alone long enough for it to become distressed’.

Possible way forward

While a breach in the provisions listed in the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs is not a legal offence in itself, it can be used to demonstrate a failure to comply with the current regulations listed under Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

The Act states that a person has committed an offence if they fail to take reasonable steps to ensure that the needs of an animal for which they are responsible are met.

Complaints made to the appropriate authorities could result in an investigation by the police or an appropriately appointed inspector (usually a trading standards or animal welfare officer appointed by the local council), who may choose to involve a local veterinary surgeon. The RSPCA can investigate complaints in a private capacity and may choose to involve any of the above authorities or a local veterinary surgeon.

An inspector who suspects that a person is failing to comply with Section 9 of the Act may issue an improvement notice, notifying the dogs’ owners that the situation is under review and that improvements must be made by a certain date, when re-inspection will occur. Failure to comply with the notice would result in prosecution under the Act and could also lead to seizure and re-homing of the animals.

Ultimately, judgement on the decision to prosecute is made by a court of law.