Everyday ethics

This month’s dilemma, ‘Are you positive? The fate of a shelter cat’, is presented and discussed by Anne Fawcett and Juliana Brailey. 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 ‘Grey squirrel treatment and hand-rearing’, which was published in the October issue of In Practice, appears on page 615.

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.

Are you positive? The fate of a shelter cat

A shelter cat with recent fight wounds tested negative for FIV on an in-house test; however, it was still suspected the cat was FIV-positive and it was held for retesting. Six weeks later it tested FIV-positive and was euthanased. Subsequently, it was determined that the cat had previously received a single FIV vaccination during its stay in the shelter. As it is impossible, on the basis of serology, to distinguish between antibodies resulting from natural infection versus those that are vaccination-associated, the result may have been a false positive. What factors should be considered in determining whether to euthanase a FIV-positive cat?

There are two key issues to consider here. The first is whether euthanasia of a FIV-positive cat is ethically justifiable. Secondly, we should ask whether making decisions about euthanasia, based on a test that may yield false positives, is ethically justifiable.

Issues to consider

With appropriate management, FIV-infected cats can live as long as uninfected cats (Hosie and others 2009). Furthermore, if kept indoors, FIV-infected cats pose minimal risks to other animals. If we employ a strict definition of euthanasia as an act of mercy for alleviating unremitting suffering, FIV-positivity alone does not justify euthanasia (Levy and others 2008).

It may be argued that shelters cannot ethically justify rehoming an animal with a health condition, even if it is asymptomatic. The trouble is that cats can suffer a myriad of asymptomatic health conditions – some of which may never manifest clinically – but it is beyond the resources of shelters to definitively rule these out.

In response to the second question, it should be remembered that no diagnostic test is perfect, including the FIV antibody test. False negative results occur before seroconversion or, in the late stages of disease, due to profound immunodepletion or sequestration of anti-FIV antibodies in immune complexes (Hosie and others 2009). False positive results may be due to maternal antibodies or previous vaccination. Therefore, it is impossible in this case to tell if the cat’s positive result was due to natural infection, vaccination, or indeed both. FIV-vaccination is considered non-core by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association Vaccination Guidelines Group (Day and others 2010).

Differentiation between true FIV infection and FIV vaccine-induced antibodies requires confirmationary testing via viral culture or PCR, but such tests are costly and time consuming.

In all shelters, excluding those with a no-kill policy, a positive-FIV test often leads to euthanasia of the animal. Many shelters don’t pursue confirmatory testing due to increased costs, delays and difficulty in interpreting discordant results (Levy and others 2008).

A pure utilitarian would likely agree with euthanasia on the basis of a positive antibody test in a cat with a history of fighting because, in the majority of cases, the FIV-positive status of the cat would be true. If the aim is to reduce FIV in the greater feline population and ensure the health of rehomed cats, this approach results in the greatest good for the greatest number, even if a small proportion of FIV-negative cats are euthanased because of false positive results.

Possible way forward

The principles of beneficence and non-maleficence require veterinarians to maximise benefits to patients while minimising harm. In the above case, incomplete testing, poor record keeping and perhaps poor knowledge about the impact of a disease condition have led to harm (loss of life) of the patient and an unjust or unfair outcome.

High stakes decisions about euthanasia of an asymptomatic animal with a disease that may not affect its lifespan should be based on a more solid diagnosis. At the very least, it should be based on...
a highly probable poor prognosis based on available evidence.

A shelter may adopt a policy whereby asymptomatic, FIV-positive cats are rehomed to owners who are fully informed about the condition and agree to keep their cats entirely indoors. Alternatively, it may be possible for shelters to look into low-cost options for confirmatory testing. Although time-consuming, this would ensure that false positive cats are not euthanased (but may not alter the approach of euthanising asymptomatic positive cats).

It is recommended that all cats get tested for FIV before vaccination, as the FIV vaccination may lead to a false positive result that can in turn lead to the death of an otherwise healthy animal. Veterinarians and shelter staff are morally and professionally obliged to restrict vaccination to at-risk cats; a cat housed on its own in a shelter is not at risk of acquiring FIV, which is spread largely through bite wounds. Shelter staff should also keep accurate, accessible records to ensure that the vaccination statuses of cats is known before FIV testing. Since the vaccination status of cats entering shelters is often unknown, veterinarians administering the FIV vaccination could insist that vaccinated cats are identified (eg, via a tag or a microchip number) to ensure that their vaccination status is not confused with natural infection.

**Comments on the dilemma in the October issue:**

**‘Grey squirrel treatment and hand-rearing’**

The dilemma in the October issue involved an injured female grey squirrel and her offspring, which were brought to your practice. While the mother had to be humanely euthanased, the question remained of what to do with the kits. A nurse was eager to hand-rear them but you were also aware that grey squirrels are considered a destructive, non-native species (In Practice, October 2012, volume 34, pp 550-551). Glen Cousquer commented that there were empirical, legal and ethical considerations to take into account when making this decision. As a profession, veterinarians had a duty to ensure that the welfare of an animal was not compromised as well as to educate the public about such ethical issues. Based on those considerations and professional priorities, he suggested that hand-rearing the squirrels and releasing them under licence would be a possible way forward. However, the kits would have to be humanely killed if they originated from an area with red squirrels, into which they could not be released.

I was very surprised to read that if ‘the squirrels are from an area that hosts red squirrels...the kits should be humanely killed’. I think it is inherently wrong that it is not even an option to attempting to relocate or rehome the young. It was man who introduced grey squirrels into this part of the world, so not only have we already led to the decline of the red squirrel population, but we are now enforcing these regulations in an attempt to bring back the natural order that was destroyed by man in the first place. In this scenario, upholding these values is leading us to kill innocent animals. I’m in no doubt that it can be argued that this is the right thing to do in terms of preserving a species, but in the big picture, and also the immediate one, I do not see how the killing of these young animals can ever be ethically right.

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MY questioning of the very assumptions on which an ethical evaluation is made reminds us that there are, arguably, no moral facts, and that judgments are contextual and must take into account and question the contemporary thinking of the time. Nussbaum’s Frontiers of Justice reminds us that we live in an age where the nation state has staked a claim to sovereignty that often supercedes that of humanity. In any ethical dilemma we forget about the individual at our peril, dismissing them as collateral damage that can be justified economically or on the grounds of self interest.

In the case of the grey squirrel, its classification as an alien species is possible because, as a terrestrial mammal, its ability to colonise new lands is reliant on man, and we are in the habit of viewing humanity in opposition to nature. This allows us to view man-made effects as unnatural.

While, there may be a great deal of value in critically scrutinising the effect we have on the environment, especially, given our ability to cause great damage to it, we should remain humble in the face of nature for we are part of it rather than its master and keeper. The concept of alien versus native species is, debatably, a false dualism, much like individual is to society, human to nature and human to animal. Any frontiers between nations and species are but lines drawn on a map; they are cultural creations that we are accountable for. We need to recognize how our patterns and habits of thought affect our moral judgment.

Returning to the grey squirrel, we clearly need to remain sensitive to the welfare of the individual, to its right to life and of the welfare and flourishing of the wider ecosystem. We, therefore, need to respond as pragmatically as possible to such situations rather than lapsing into a rule-following default, which does not do justice to the practical wisdom we should demonstrate as professionals.

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References


doi:10.1136/inp.e6710