Decision Making

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1. The dilemma in the September issue dealt with vets attempting to put themselves in clients’ shoes. Practitioners are often asked what they would do if the animal was actually their own, and it can be difficult to know how best to answer (In Practice, September 2012, volume 34, pp 494-495). Steven McCulloch considered the different permutations of what the question, “What if it was your dog?”, might actually mean. The first involved the vet taking only their own moral values and practical resource base into consideration. Alternatively, the practitioner could answer based on their own moral values but the specific client’s resource base. The third interpretation involved deciding on the dog’s treatment based solely on the morals and resources of the particular owner. He suggested that answering the question based on the second interpretation was a possible way forward, as it seemed reasonable to believe this was essentially what the client wanted to know. After having answered the question, a brief explanation by the vet, of what their professional judgement was based on, could help foster the client’s trust and open up discussion about treatment options.

2. During a discussion at the 2012 BVA AWF forum, some practitioners were concerned that new graduates were now not answering this age-old question, maybe as a result of their now formalised ethics training! This was perceived to be unhelpful to clients, and some had even complained to this effect. However, despite Steve McCulloch’s analysis that it is right to give your views based on your own moral values and your client’s practical means, it seems to me that there are some problems inherent to this approach. First, critically, your values are not necessarily your client’s values. Secondly, the client doesn’t take full ownership of their decision. To circumvent both of these problems, it would seem preferable to help your client by facilitating them to make their own decision based on their values and their practical circumstances. Of course, this may take a bit of time to achieve. Assuming their preferred option overlaps with the possible courses of action you consider reasonable to undertake, your client should feel both assisted and empowered by your approach, which in turn will serve to cement the trust between you both.

3. Comments on the dilemma in the September issue: ‘What if it was your dog?’

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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. We pay a small honorarium for contributions that are published.