The case of the whelping bitch

**Issues to consider**

At the outset we should look at how the various individuals are impacted by different treatment options, in this case, C-section or euthanasia. The affected individuals are the bitch, the unborn fetuses, the veterinary surgeon, the owner of the dog, the representative of the owner and the owner(s) of the veterinary practice. These individuals have been listed in roughly the order that they are affected, both positively and negatively, by the case.

Does the euthanasia of a dog, which could otherwise have a life worth living (ie, experience net positive value) constitute a moral harm? The issue can be contested negatively, by the case.

**Euthanasia**

The owner has declared that she has no intention of paying for any veterinary treatment. While there is no guarantee about the outcome of the caesarean you know that the breeder sells her puppies for about £400 each. The carer has offered to pay £250 towards the costs. How should you proceed?

**Caesarean section**

In many clinics, the veterinary surgeon as an employee is constrained to perform euthanasia in such a case. The act of euthanasia results in the following harms and benefits:

- The bitch and puppies are harmed due to loss of life;
- The veterinary surgeon is harmed due to moral stress;
- The owner is harmed due to loss of bitch and puppies;
- The owner’s friend is harmed due to unpleasant experience;
- The effect on the veterinary practice owner is neutral.

**Caesarean section with ovariohysterectomy**

It is also possible to conduct the C-section on the proviso that the bitch is spayed at the same time.
This means that the same scenario cannot happen again in the future, at least with the same bitch. To eliminate the possibility of a repeat scenario with the same client, a letter could also be sent out to the owner accompanying the full bill, advising she will not be welcome to use the services of the practice in the future, should the bill remain unpaid.

Possible way forward

In these three options, the harms and benefits have not been outlined to conduct a utilitarian (cost-benefit) analysis. The veterinary surgeon is constrained to practice according to the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, which is deontological in structure (i.e., concerned with principles and duties). Specifically, the code prioritises the welfare of the animal, in this case the whelping bitch and the unborn puppies.

The preferred option of the veterinary surgeon will be influenced by contextual factors, but, fundamentally, it will depend on the issue pointed out earlier. If the veterinary surgeon believes euthanasia to be harmful to the bitch and her unborn fetuses, it will result in moral conflict. The vet will be faced with destroying the very animals which the profession endeavours to help, acting against moral conscience and, indeed, against the ethos of our professional code of ethics. For this reason, it may be unreasonable for employers to expect their employees to perform euthanasia in such cases, since this could result in severe moral stress.

The author’s preferred option in this case would be to perform a C-section with conditions. A C-section alone would allow for the situation to be repeated in the future, which is difficult to condone. I believe the profession ought to be charitable at times, but in this scenario a deliberate act on the part of the owner has resulted in the bitch’s predicament. This, together with the idea that the owner is set to benefit financially, makes a straightforward C-section morally problematic.

Conducting a C-section with conditions is good for the bitch, the puppies, the veterinary surgeon, the owner and the owner’s friend. If the practice owners permit discretion in such cases, they can rest assured that the businesses most important assets – its employees – will be sleeping well at night and doing a great job during the day.

Of course, the owner could refuse the conditions, and the original problem would resurface, but there is a significant difference now. The owner has been offered a carrot and turned it down. If the options are C-section plus spay, or euthanasia, it is irrational to decline surgery, since the owner would herself be disposing of a companion as well as financial gains. If this reasoning is put to the owners, with delicacy of course, a reasonable outcome for all should be achieved and the bottom line – the welfare of the whelping bitch – ensured.

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