The dilemma in the January issue considered the use of antimicrobials in farm animals in light of current concerns about resistance. In particular, it asked whether some sick animals would be more valuable to society if they were killed rather than being treated with antimicrobials, and whether that would make this practice desirable (In Practice, January 2015, volume 37, pages 46-47). Paul Roger noted that the dilemma started with the assumption that certain classes of animal were kept for the benefit of people and that society determined the nature of that relationship. He pointed out that working within evidence-based veterinary medicine would make it difficult to choose the killing of sick animals when there might be realistic expectations of successful treatment, but that the situation was complicated by the fact that clinical diagnosis and treatment were not exact sciences. He proposed using the five freedoms of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 as a basis for tackling the dilemma, adding that the motives for killing an animal under such circumstances would have to be in line with the principles of biomedical ethics.

Comments on the dilemma in the January issue: ‘Value and treatment’

The dilemma in the January issue considered the use of antimicrobials in farm animals in light of current concerns about resistance. In particular, it asked whether some sick animals would be more valuable to society if they were killed rather than being treated with antimicrobials, and whether that would make this practice desirable (In Practice, January 2015, volume 37, pages 46-47). Paul Roger noted that the dilemma started with the assumption that certain classes of animal were kept for the benefit of people and that society determined the nature of that relationship. He pointed out that working within evidence-based veterinary medicine would make it difficult to choose the killing of sick animals when there might be realistic expectations of successful treatment, but that the situation was complicated by the fact that clinical diagnosis and treatment were not exact sciences. He proposed using the five freedoms of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 as a basis for tackling the dilemma, adding that the motives for killing an animal under such circumstances would have to be in line with the principles of biomedical ethics.

The following story is simplified to focus on the welfare-related ‘economics’, but suppose that there is group of fattening cattle all due for slaughter in just over one month’s time. Assuming good management, they have 34 days of good quality life left to them. One of their number steps on a nail that goes all the way through the pedal bone and out the top. This nail is removed, the wound is drained and antibiotic cover is given, but it quickly transpires that the bone cannot be saved. So with 30 days to go to slaughter, this individual has one claw removed. One of the arguments to justify this goes as follows: it will take one month for him to recover, during which time his quality of life will range from 10 per cent to 100 per cent of normal (ie, recovered). This is the equivalent of approximately 16 days of acceptable life and then he will have to take extra time to gain condition, another six weeks. Therefore his time of sickness has cost him pain and discomfort, which the others did not experience, but has bought him 28 days of life. Do those extra days have value? Are they one of the justifications for the course of action? Or should he have been shot and bled on the first day?

This method of argument for management involving treatment, if accepted at all, does possibly open ‘a can of worms’, since one might have to argue that the relatively short working lifespan of dairy cows may be a welfare issue. But I wonder, is this why we have as a profession rarely addressed the issue?

Richard Brown,
Hong Kong

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@bvedit.co.uk. We pay a small honorarium for contributions that are published.