In the dilemma discussed in the November/December issue of In Practice, a client had asked you to accompany him to see a tup that he considered to be an excellent buy in terms of its potential production value. However, you were aware that the client’s farm had a history of caesarians and vet-assisted lambings and were concerned that this tup might add to the problem (IP, November/December 2015, vol 37, pp 550-551). Richard Brown suggested that it was not a lost cause to try and reduce the amount of vet-assisted lambings. However, simply telling the client that the purchase was not a good idea could create a problem for the farmer and you should take time to find alternative solutions. It would be advisable to check with the farmer on his estimate of income, as he might have overestimated this. If you decided to go to the vendor’s farm to see the tup, biosecurity should be a priority. You should also make it clear that your focus would be on animal health and welfare, not on the conformation or genetic merits of the animal.

Richard Brown’s position seems to be that the vet should advise against purchasing the tup, even if it makes economic sense. This is a valid claim, which is generated from the vet’s fundamental duty to protect animal welfare. Despite this, to claim that economics ‘is not relevant to the ethics’ may be excessively demanding. The claim does, however, bring out the different roles and responsibilities of the vet and farmer. The fundamental role and responsibility of the vet is to safeguard animal welfare. In contrast, that of the farmer is to produce food. Since the latter is done in a capitalist economic system, the farmer aims to maximise profit. Therein lies the potential conflict that generates Brown’s scenario, and that of many similar ones for farm vets on a daily basis.

Ethics is concerned with right action. For the farmer, maximising food production and/or profit is clearly relevant to his ethics. Brown’s scenario, however, refers to the vet’s decision making. Here, narrowly, we may agree that ethics and economics are distinct, and that the vet’s duty is generated by a professional (ethical) code of ethics. Despite this, it may be excessive to claim that economics (or a monetary cost benefit analysis of purchasing the tup) is not relevant to the ethics. As stated, this cost benefit analysis influences and perhaps determines the farmer’s decision. Furthermore, the vet has duties towards the client, additional to the fundamental duty to protect animal welfare. Hence, if the farmer’s decision is influenced by economics, and the vet has some, albeit secondary, duties to the farmer, it is evident that economics is relevant to ethics.

The scenario discussed also feeds into the debate concerning the wellbeing of the veterinary profession. Brown suggests that if you advise against buying the tup, ‘you have created a problem for the farmer’ and that ‘If you produce a problem, you also need to find a solution.’ Such comments may reflect the excessive demands that we, as a profession, place on ourselves. In advising the client against purchasing the tup, has the vet not simply fulfilled his/her professional responsibilities to advise the client?

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