EVERYDAY ETHICS

Treating exotics when your colleague has limited expertise

THE DILEMMA

It is a busy morning in the clinic and the vet asks you, the practice nurse, to weigh a pet shop-owned Syrian hamster who, for the past two months, has been suffering from intermittent diarrhoea and conjunctivitis. The vet decides that it is best to calculate another course of antibiotics and send it back to the store. During your examination, the patient feels cold, is skin tenting, facially grimacing, reactive to abdominal palpation and her back end is stained and wet. She is bradycardic, hypothermic and has lost 13 per cent bodyweight since her last visit. You believe that the patient is sick and requires urgent attention. The vet has limited skills, interest and knowledge with exotic species, and, in addition to this, the practice is understaffed and ill-equipped for such cases. You explain to him that the hamster needs hospitalisation, stabilisation, diagnostics and intensive care, as her condition could otherwise be fatal. The vet is initially reluctant, but after a few minutes says to do ‘whatever you think best’. How do you proceed?

Issues to consider

The key stakeholders in this case include the hamster, you (the nurse), the vet and the pet store manager (who will authorise payment for treatment needed).

Although you feel responsible for the outcome of the patient, you should not be expected to make the diagnosis. It is the veterinary surgeon who is responsible for determining the diagnosis and deciding the correct course of action, and has a duty to oversee and advise the nursing team. However, since the vet in charge of this case has limited knowledge and interest of veterinary care of this particular species and has advised another...
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course of antibiotics, there doesn’t appear to be much scope for carrying out diagnostic testing, and hence a more tailored treatment plan unless you intervene.

However, there are other matters to consider. Your practice is faced with an insufficient number of staff and a high volume of work, as well as ill-equipped facilities, resources and knowledge to care for a critically ill, exotic patient. On top of this, you don’t wish to create a potential conflict between what the vet believes is ‘best’ for the patient and what you believe is the right course of action.

The RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses stipulates that ‘veterinary nurses must make animal health and welfare their first consideration’. They must ‘keep within their own area of competence and refer cases responsibly’, as well as ‘provide veterinary and nursing care that is appropriate and adequate’, and take the necessary steps to provide 24-hour ‘emergency first aid and pain relief to animals according to their skills and the specific situation’ (RCVS 2019).

Possible way forward
Following the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses, and taking into consideration the hamster’s condition and prognosis, you could consider the following options:

- Provide first aid and pain relief. Then, advise referral to an exotic’s specialist, which can be arranged via the veterinary surgeon. By seeking advice from an expert, you will increase the chances of survival for the patient and the best available treatment options can be offered.
  However, this is dependent on the referral clinic being able to take on the case and the pet store manager’s authorisation of fees.

- Provide first aid and pain relief. Then hospitalise and attempt to stabilise the patient, carry out diagnostic testing and provide intensive care. This would involve researching the patient’s clinical signs and possible treatment methods, as well as contacting an exotics expert for advice and liaising with the veterinary surgeon to approve any decisions.

- Another option would be euthanasia of the hamster, which can be performed by the veterinary surgeon. Although this would end the patient’s immediate pain and suffering, as well as relieve the cost of treatment and added workload to the practice, it might not be a valid option from a welfare perspective if the practice does not carry out an initial diagnosis. By providing a thorough assessment, along with effective treatment and appropriate care, the animal could actually make a full recovery.

References

This section gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute their approaches for dealing with ethical dilemmas in veterinary practice. Each month, a case scenario is presented, followed by discussion of some of the issues involved. In addition, a possible way forward is suggested. However, there is rarely a cut-and-dried answer and readers are invited to suggest alternative approaches at vet.inpractice@bmj.com.

The section is coordinated by Steven McCulloch, senior lecturer in human animal studies at the Centre for Animal Welfare, University of Winchester. Articles aim to provide a framework that will help practising veterinarians find solutions when faced with similar dilemmas.