Comments on: When your duty of care extends beyond the patient to the client

DILEMMA

An elderly client, with dementia, comes into the clinic with her seven-year-old, diabetic terrier, Charlie. From the consultation it is clear that Charlie isn’t receiving the care he needs and his medication isn’t being administered properly – subsequently Charlie’s condition is deteriorating. You are concerned that Charlie is at serious risk of medical complications if the owner cannot manage his treatment. The owner, who lives alone, often refers to Charlie as her only companion. What would you advise?
(IP, December 2019, vol 41, pp 517-518).

WHAT initially saddens me about this article is that Charlie, the dog, is given a name and the owner, with dementia, is not. Vets easily get tied up in dealing with animals and overlook the importance of being human – perhaps that’s why our suicide rate is so high. Ensuring animal welfare is, of course, a huge responsibility for vets. But it’s not our only responsibility.

In this scenario, along with all others, we must, as stated in section 2.2.c of the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, consider the circumstances of the client. Should we not, in addition to improving animal welfare, also act to restore human dignity and welfare? So yes, the owner (let’s call her Sarah) is vulnerable; however, the practice team can combine Charlie’s regularly administered treatment for diabetes with the routines of dementia care, supported by registered veterinary nurses, neighbours, extended family and carers. Why do this, you might ask? It is simple, because Sarah is worth it, and her relationship with Charlie has a part in her own caring process. Having a pet gives Sarah a sense of purpose and adds routine to her life, which we should allow her to hold onto for as long as possible. With this, dignity is restored. I advise all practitioners to make their practice dementia friendly!

Austin Kirwan

Austin Kirwan is a veterinary surgeon and medical ethicist from West Lancashire

CASES involving elderly clients and their companion animals are often very delicate, and time, empathy and good communication is key in order to reach a mutual solution between the vet and the client. We need to ensure the client is aware that an inconsistent dose of insulin is detrimental to Charlie’s health and wellbeing. Therefore, it is not only our moral duty, but also our professional responsibility, as defined by the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, to ensure an active plan is implemented before the patient leaves the clinic.

Our main focus should be on finding a solution that is agreeable with the owner, and most importantly, ensures Charlie’s condition is properly managed. She refers to Charlie as her only companion and so it is highly unlikely that she would be open to the discussion of re-homing him; however, she might be willing to accept extra help. This could be from a family member, a neighbour or a dog sitter – it might also be possible to receive daily visits from a district veterinary nurse. These are all people who can provide the owner with the extra assistance she needs to care for Charlie. In fact, added human interaction might be a benefit to them both.

Alternatively, automatic reminders can be sent directly to the owner’s phone from the practice, or saved to her device as a regular alarm. With the aid of technology to implement routine, the owner might be capable of administering Charlie’s treatment alone. This can be supervised by follow-up appointments at the clinic or via regular visits from the district veterinary nurse.

Carefully explaining why Charlie’s health is deteriorating will help the owner understand the necessity for change. We must also ensure that we clearly outline all the options available in an attempt not to sway her judgement. Ultimately, it is the owner’s decision, so take the time to listen, have an honest and empathetic conversation and, ideally, come to a mutual and satisfactory agreement.

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POLL

Last month we asked: What advice would you give an elderly client with dementia who is having difficulty caring for her seven-year-old, diabetic dog, Charlie. He has ketones in his blood and urine and it is clear his condition is not being managed properly. His owner often refers to Charlie as her only companion.

77% of respondents said they would advise the owner to re-home Charlie because it is in his best interest

18% of respondents said they would overlook the situation because re-homing Charlie could have an impact on the owner’s health

5% of respondents said they would recommend euthanasia

Vote in this month’s poll at: twitter.com/Vet_Record

*22 respondents

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