Dealing with a case of suspected ‘petfishing’

The Dilemma

You are a newly graduated vet in your first year of practice. A client comes into the practice with a French bulldog puppy. The owner bought the puppy very recently from a breeder that they found on the internet. The puppy has come in with oculonasal discharge, a soft productive cough, a high temperature, vomiting and diarrhoea. The puppy also has a rare black and tan coat colour which you know is not approved by the Kennel Club, despite the puppy having ‘Kennel Club’ paperwork. You suspect this may be a case of ‘petfishing’ – bought via an illegal online advert. How should you proceed?

Issues to consider

During the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a surge in people buying puppies, and with this comes various concerns. A major concern is the increase in cases of ‘petfishing’ – a term used when advertisements for puppies are placed online from unreliable sellers, which are made to seem legitimate. In 2020, a law was passed that made it illegal for puppies and kittens to be sold through third party sellers (Defra 2020).

The first concern for a vet when faced with a puppy that has potentially come from an illegal origin is the welfare of the animal under their care. In this case, the puppy was presented with clinical signs consistent with distemper which must be investigated and treated adequately. Additionally, the presence of other underlying diseases or clinical signs must be considered – this puppy may have had a higher risk of being subjected to abuse and poor welfare if it did come from the illegal pet trade (Maher and Wyatt 2019), and the repercussions of this warrant further examination. Indeed, if you are suspicious of ‘petfishing’ this should be discussed with a more senior person in the practice.

The second consideration is whether the suspected case should be reported to the authorities, and it is very important to consider client confidentiality in this instance. When making a decision about disclosing information in a report, try to obtain consent from the client first. In the
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RCVS Code of Conduct it states that disclosure of information can be justified if there are concerns of animal welfare, wider public interest or if it is required by law (RCVS 2020). Therefore in this case, where the reporting of the incident could be at odds with client confidentiality, you would have grounds to disclose this information without client consent.

The third consideration to make regards the client. In many cases of ‘petfishing’, the client has no idea that they have been subject to such a scheme; therefore these cases should be handled sensitively.

Possible ways forward

The first priority should be administering any treatment that the puppy needs. In this case, the suspected distemper needs to be adequately evaluated and treated and, as mentioned earlier, other underlying diseases and clinical signs should also be thoroughly investigated.

Once any necessary treatment is underway you could then ask the owner to provide more information about where they got the puppy from to determine whether there is sufficient grounds for reporting this case. Information about how the client found and received the puppy should be gathered; from this, any red flags and points of concern can be highlighted and discussed with the owner. In this case, one such sign of malconduct is the rare coat colour which is not approved by the Kennel Club (Kennel Club 2015), despite the ‘approved’ paperwork.

The presence of clinical signs of distemper immediately suggests that this puppy may have been subject to poor living conditions – this disease is currently rare but ‘canine distemper is most likely to affect dogs when they are crowded, stressed, immunologically susceptible, and directly or indirectly exposed to infected wildlife’ (Schumaker and others 2012). Indeed, this would fit with suspicions of the puppy coming from an illegal breeder.

At this stage, it is important to be compassionate with the owner, as they are often not aware that they have been a victim of ‘petfishing’ and may be distressed, so be careful not to just point the blame. Moreover, it is important to educate them and encourage them to spread awareness about the signs of ‘petfishing’. There are various educational resources that you could provide owners with that offer a step-by-step process for safely buying a puppy, as well as key warning signs to look out for (see useful resources). You could also consider having leaflets or posters put up in your practice to guide owners through this. As the Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a surge of people buying puppies (Dogs Trust 2020), providing this information to prospective owners is more important than ever.

If you think there is sufficient evidence that the puppy has come from the illegal puppy trade, this would warrant a report. This can be done in various ways: contact the local Trading Standards office, call the RSPCA hotline (0300 1234 999) or contact the police or local authority where the suspect is located. The report can be made by either you or the owner, but as mentioned earlier, client consent and confidentiality needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, all of your observations and discussions during this process should be accurately and comprehensively recorded.

Finally, advice should be given to the owners on how to manage their new puppy. This is key as the puppy may have underlying health/behavioural problems caused by past experiences, some of which may not yet be evident. Reassure the owner and encourage them to come back to the practice if they have any concerns in the future.

References


Useful resources

The Puppy Contract – how to spot a puppy dealer: https://puppycontract.org.uk/puppy-buyer/how-spot-puppy-dealer

This series gives readers the opportunity to consider and contribute to discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise 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 in such cases, and readers may wish to suggest an alternative approach.

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