Proceedings of the 33rd World Small Animal Veterinary Congress

Dublin, Ireland - 2008

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Welfare in Practice 4: How to Deal with Ethical Dilemmas like Tail Docking and Exotic Pets
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The title specifies two general ethical questions but, in clinical practice, many questions are more specific and nuanced, depending on the animal’s condition and the owner’s circumstances. In this interactive presentation, we will review a systematic approach to addressing ethical questions, and then apply it to a case solicited from the audience.

Different points of view
To some readers, the notion that the cosmetic tail docking of puppies or the treatment of exotic pets pose a dilemma of any kind may be, at worst, insulting. This is because the demand for both services exists, and it is surely better for the animals that a qualified professional meet the demand. If a veterinary practice does not provide the services, there may be adverse consequences for the animals concerned, and for the veterinary business, with attendant ill effects on the business owner, employees and dependants. Furthermore, the notion that a policy of providing the services may be a failing in duty of care is very offensive, understandably. Such feelings reflect a rights-based ethical position that is based on weighing up the consequences of the provision or non-provision of services for the general good of all concerned.

To other readers, it may be clear that tail docking should never be provided, and exotic animals not treated, regardless of any net good consequences of providing those services. In this analysis, removing a healthy puppy’s tail when there is no clinical indication for it, and indirectly supporting the removal of exotic species from their native environments for keeping as pets does not respect those animals’ worth. Here, the notion that not providing the services concerned is a failure in duty of care is very offensive, understandably. These feelings reflect a utilitarian ethical position that is based on weighing up the consequences of the provision or non-provision of services in the general good of all concerned.

Legal and scientific aspects
The above are only three of several possible ethical perspectives. However, there has been very little research on what ethical positions prevail among veterinarians. Research in Canada has suggested a mixture of rights and utilitarianism (Schneider, 2001). A further consideration is that ethical considerations do not exist in a vacuum. They overlap with legal aspects. For example: in the UK, the cosmetic tail docking of puppies has been a matter of serious professional misconduct for veterinarians for more than a decade. With the new Animal Welfare Acts of England, Scotland and Wales the procedure has also become illegal in most cases. Thus, even if a veterinarian had no personal objections to performing the procedure in e.g. a Yorkshire terrier, they would not perform it because of the double risk in law, both under their professional regulations and under the Animal Welfare Act. Thus, in the UK, the law trumps all other considerations so it is easy to refuse to tail dock a Yorkshire terrier. In some other countries however, (e.g., Ireland, the US and Canada), cosmetic tail docking is not illegal either within or without veterinary regulations. This forces the individual veterinarians in those countries to reach a considered ethical position on the matter, and the lack of legal opposition to tail docking makes a decision not to dock potentially more difficult to reach or to maintain.

Scientific information is an essential element in ethical decision-making. For example, there is abundant research from farm species indicating that puppies also are likely to suffer pain when tail docking is conducted without pain relief (see Bennet and Perini (2003) for a review). Other evidence from rats and human infants strongly suggests that some puppies who are docked without adequate analgesia are likely to develop hyperalgesia, in the tail region or more distally (Clancy 2007, Ren et al 2004, Taddio 1997, 2004).
Addressing ethical concerns

Taking issues of ethics, science and law into account, Mullan and Main (2006) from the University of Bristol have outlined a step-wise approach to addressing ethical concerns:

• Identify all possible courses of action (e.g. dock puppies’ tails with no analgesia; dock tails using a ring block; dock tails using an epidural anaesthetic and an opioid; don’t dock puppies’ tails).

• Establish the interests of the affected parties. Here, the ethical matrix is helpful. The matrix considers three types of interest for each party concerned (Food Ethics Council 2008). The three interests are: well-being (welfare including health), autonomy (freedom and choice), and justice (fairness). In the case of tail-docking, the parties include: the puppies; the breeder; the breeders and showers of the breed concerned; the veterinarian; the veterinary profession; and the future owners of the puppies.

• Identify ethical issues involved (e.g. should a vet always do what a client wants? Does it matter if puppies undergo pain during tail-docking?)

• Establish how the law is involved in addressing the dilemma

• Decide on a course of action

• Minimise the impact of the decision

To sum up, daily veterinary practice often presents situations that create ethical challenges. Being aware of the main ethical approaches (rights-based etc), and our own in particular, can help us understand any gut reactions we and those around use may have to the challenges concerned. (To help identify your main ethical position, see Hanlon (2008) for a quiz). However, to make a considered ethical response to the case at issue, it is important to take a systematic approach. This can take time. Good client communication can help us here: as necessary and where possible we can explain to the owner that, in order to provide them with the best advice, we would like to take some time to review the case and will call them later in the day to discuss it. Almost every ethical dilemma is different, but useful primers describing real cases are found in the Everyday Ethics series in In Practice, and in the long-running ethics column in the Canadian Veterinary Journal.

References


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