Applied Animal Ethics: The Responsibility of The Veterinary and Veterinary Nursing Profession (Ethics Part3)

Abstract
This bitesize lecture is the third in our three-part series on Animal Ethics. It draws on the discussions of the first two lectures and turns to the veterinary profession in detail in relation to animal ethics. It discusses concepts such as responsibility, integrity, complicity and moral stress and moral action, and uses the example of convenience euthanasia to discuss conscientious objection.

Learning Outcomes
- A chance to think critically about animal ethics in relation to the veterinary profession
- A chance to apply animal ethics in practice

Author
Katherine Spear BA(Hons) PgDip MA VN

Course Notes
Introduction
This lecture moves on from our discussion of animal ethics theory and applied animal ethics and is the final one in this series.

In this lecture we will consider the Veterinary Nursing Profession and its responsibility in relation to applying animal ethics in practice. To do this we will be considering complicity and animal welfare, and will then look at the specific ethical dilemma of convenience euthanasia, where people request their pet be euthanised for no good reason, and the possibilities of conscientious objection when this dilemma arises in practice.

Through this we will show that the profession should take the lead in improving the lives of the animals it has responsibility for within today’s society and that it is the responsibility of vet nurses to be at the forefront of the effort to improve the ethical treatment of animals.

- The Responsibility of The Veterinary Nursing Profession
- Welfare and The Welfare Account
- Integrity
- Moral stress
- Complicity
- Moral Action
- Convenience Euthanasia and Conscientious Objection
The Responsibility of The Veterinary Nursing Profession

The responsibility, and moral and legal obligations, of Vets and Vet Nurses to animals extend further than for most people, with direct responsibility for the health and welfare of animals on a daily basis.

The UK governing body for the veterinary profession, the RCVS, have a code of conduct for all veterinary professionals who opt to abide by the code in order to register and practice legally. For both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses this states that they “must make animal health and welfare their first consideration when attending to animals.”

Thus, the profession makes it clear that the responsibility to animals is paramount. Such obligation may well be seen as going beyond a utilitarian costs-benefits approach to animal ethics, for it does not allow for the welfare or health of an animal to be overlooked for any reason.

Yet, in factory farms, laboratories and even in homes, animals are suffering on a mass scale at the hands of humans and this is something that deserves attention. In order to give appropriate consideration to this we will look at how the veterinary and veterinary nursing profession itself deals with animals and animal ethics in practice.

Welfare

The Welfare Account approach proposed by James Yeates which we discussed in the Applied Ethics lecture, is very apt for the veterinary and veterinary nursing profession, and indeed, may help in ethical situations, for, as Yeates says,

“That of us in veterinary practice are especially likely to have significant impacts on the welfare of patients and other animals. Sometimes we have a positive impact by lessening the harms caused by other people or by natural processes such as disease. At other times, we have a negative impact by harming animals or helping other people to harm them….Having a healthy animal welfare account requires maximising welfare credit and minimising welfare debt. Harms should be minimised wherever possible……Some harm may be necessary In order to gain bigger welfare benefits, for example when surgery causes pain but cures the animal of a painful condition At other times, welfare benefits can be obtained only by taking certain risks, for example where surgery risks causing neuromas or phantom limb pains, and we may have to speculate to accumulate”.

(Yeates, James (2013), Animal Welfare in Veterinary Practice, Sussex, Published by Wiley Blackwell for The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, p2)
The Welfare Account

As this shows, a welfare account approach may be helpful for veterinary and veterinary nursing professionals, or indeed anyone, in helping to decide how to apply animal ethics in practice. What it also shows, however, is that it may not always be that simple, as determining the consequences of a decision or action may not be easy. This problem comes back to the problem with relying on a utilitarian approach to animal ethics, as it can often be impossible to predict consequences in a practical way.

To illustrate this problem we can use an example of the now entrenched problem of certain breeds of pedigree dogs that often cannot successfully give birth naturally and leaves them reliant on human intervention. This has arisen due to the continued reliance on caesarean section and is a consequence unforeseen by the veterinary practitioner needing to carry out a life-saving operation.

As James Kirkwood states,

“The current bizarre situation that 90% of Boston terriers cannot be born naturally but have to be delivered by caesarean section (Evans & Adams, 2010) has come about because of interventions to save dogs in what were, initially, rare cases of birth difficulties. The present situation is because the very strong selection pressure against pups being too big to be born has been relieved through the almost routine use of caesareans.”

Such consequences of the accumulation of individual action may well be hard to predict and, on a strictly utilitarian basis is it better to perform such interventions and improve animal welfare on an immediate and individual basis, or have these interventions ended up creating poorer animal welfare in the long run?


As well as the difficulty in predicting consequences, another problem with a utilitarian approach that is faced regularly by veterinary and veterinary nursing professionals in practice is that it may leave no room for integrity if the emphasis is entirely on the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Although the concept of integrity may be difficult to define, Mendes sums up the basic premise of it sufficiently for the purpose of this debate,

“Integrity, then, is a matter of standing by one's most fundamental ethical commitments, where those commitments may or may not be the same as the commitments of impartial morality. A person who loses or sacrifices integrity will feel both that he has abandoned the values he stands for and that he has associated with evil.”


In the context of the veterinary treatment of animals we can use the example of a veterinary professional faced with the need for an emergency caesarean on a Boston terrier. Although such an operation may end up being a bad thing for the breed as it will exponentially perpetuate the problem as the pups saved later go on to breed themselves, the veterinary professional is more than likely to feel that in this instance, the greater good is outweighed
by feeling of responsibility over the immediate need to help the dog and perform the surgery. To not act to save a life may feel be to sacrificing integrity but would be placing immediate welfare above the welfare of the breed as a whole.

We could also use the example of the veterinary nursing professional being asked to do something considered perfectly acceptable within the profession yet against their own ethical code such as assisting with a pregnant cat spay as an example of something that may be an affront to integrity that may be difficult to resolve ethically in practice. Again, this surgery may prevent suffering of cats in the future due to the vast numbers of cats awaiting a home in rescue centres, but it may also be something the veterinary nurse feels is a breach of integrity due to either religious and personal reasons or to the fact that it is not in the welfare interest of the pregnant cat directly due to surgical risk for example.

So, as well as highlighting a problem with relying too heavily on any utilitarian approach to practical application of animal ethics, herein lies a very real problem faced by many veterinary professionals in practice. Cases where integrity trade-offs may be forced to happen are not indicative of a happy working environment and all too frequently cause what Bernard Rollin calls, “Moral stress”. Attempting to balance welfare of patients and demands of clients, and being regularly faced with ‘the greater good’ versus ‘integrity’ dilemmas means animal ethics in practice is not always easy.

Yeates too recognises this problem, saying, “In this role as veterinary professionals, we face a number of pressures and tensions. We see welfare issues every day, and many are recurrences of seemingly unending problems, despite our good work. We are personally involved in and affected by the pressures, tensions and conflicts we experience. These can cause stress, disillusionment and anger. Some people even leave the veterinary professions, and this is both terribly sad for them and a great loss for animals- especially if it is some of the most welfare concerned people who are vulnerable to these stresses”.

(Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing.


Complicity

One aspect of the veterinary profession where such conflict of conscience may arise is that of the treatment of livestock animals. Indeed, “the pages of the American profession’s official journal (Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association) regularly contain complaints by veterinarians about the complicity of organised veterinary medicine’s leadership in industrialised approaches to food and production animals”.

Perhaps veterinary input, such as the dispensing of routine antibiotics to cover for the diseases caused as a result of animals living in such confined and unnatural conditions for example, have been a contributing factor in the structural violence of factory farming. The veterinary profession has long overseen the health of farmed animals and takes an active role in how such animals are treated. And in maintaining the status quo rather than making a stand against it, we may give consideration to the question whether the veterinary profession has been complicit in allowing the suffering involved in intensive farming to perpetuate.

Veterinary involvement in this level of structural violence may be seen as complicity and it is imperative that the profession takes proactive steps to ensure acceptable levels of animal treatment to avoid lagging behind a social consensus that is gradually banning certain intensive farming practices.

As Rollin says, the profession “Should do more to handle veterinary ethical controversies in an anticipatory, ‘proactive’ way. The farm animal welfare issue is a good example. It is now clear that a reform of intensive agriculture is being demanded in most western societies to make the industry more animal friendly – even people within the industry admit that this must be done. Veterinarians should be leading this movement, because they understand the needs of both animals and producers and care for both”.


Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing, p13)

Perhaps, however, veterinary professionals are able to justify their involvement because although they are working within the system, they are working to ensure the best conditions for the animals that would be farmed whether they were present or not. Life for the animals is likely to be worse if vets were not overseeing them, and so this veterinary presence is likely to be beneficial to the animals in this respect.

Living conditions are extremely important of course.

However, focusing on welfare can disguise deeper problems such as whether we should be causing animals to suffer at all, and if the veterinary profession were to take more of a stand against factory farming, perhaps society would question it a little more.

As Rollin argues,

“as in so many socioethical problems the root lies in the fact that most people have never thought about it. Herein lies an opportunity for veterinarians, the natural champions of companion animals in society – even as paediatricians have historically been the natural advocates for children – to lay the groundwork for meaningful social change”.

(Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing, p51)
Convienience Euthanasia and Concientious Objection

And so, to look at the possibilities for change both with society and within the profession itself we will give consideration to the ethical issue of convenience euthanasia, and through this discuss conscientious objection.

This phenomenon is not a rare occurrence and happens far too often in practice.

As Rollin says, “we euthanize somewhere between 12.2 and 20.3 million healthy companion animals a year. Many of these animals are killed because owners are ignorant of the most basic aspects of the animal’s behaviour and cannot deal with treatable behaviour problems. Also, they are often ignorant of the animal’s basic needs, such as feeding, exercise, preventative medicine, and play....”.

A number of reasons may contribute to an owners decision to want to have their pet euthanised, but when it is a reason of pure human convenience it may well be ethically questionable.

As Morris says, “Animals with no heath or behavioural problems are sometimes brought in for euthanasia. Pet owners moving to a new place that does not allow animals.....owners may wish to euthanize because they had unrealistic expectations of the care a companion animal would need....perhaps the pet owner has lost interest in keeping the animal or it sheds more hair and brings more dirt into the house than expected. A new child, boyfriend or girlfriend could be allergic to the species or have an aversion to the animal. From the perspective of the veterinarian, justifying euthanasia requests for these cases is difficult because the rationale neglects the value of the animals life in favour of human convienience....in one extreme case, clients requested euthanasia of their black dog because they had recently purchased a white couch...”.

(Morris, P. (2012), Blue Juice: Euthanasia in Veterinary Medicine, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, p27)

Such requests can, understandably, be very difficult for the veterinary team, whom society seems to assume will carry out their requests unquestionably. In practice frequent requests are made with little comprehension that this may not be ethically acceptable for a professional working to help animals. Such demands to neglect their personal integrity cause significant depths of what Rollin terms ‘Moral Stress’, and has been linked to the high levels of suicide in the profession.

Being torn between the obligation to the animal patient on the one hand, and the obligation to the human client, and the concern of what will happen to the animal if the request is not met, on the other, the veterinary professional may often find their ethics in conflict, and may often end up agreeing to the request by justifying it to themselves that they can at least guarantee the animal a ‘good death’ even if it is unwarranted, and even if it does result in them becoming morally stressed and demoralised, with their integrity threatened, and jaded about the profession and society as a whole.

(Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing, p54

Veterinary surgeons and suicide: a structured review of possible influences on increased risk, Bartram, D. J., Veterinary Record 2010;166:388-397 doi:10.1136/vr.b4794)
Rollin argues that the way for veterinary professionals to deal with moral stress is to take up moral action, and that they are ideally placed to work at eliminating convenience euthanasia, in practice and in society at large. By continuing to agree to requests for convenience euthanasia the profession is perpetuating the problem and normalising the phenomenon within society.

Instead they should be making every effort to educate owners, and would-be owners about the pets they may consider buying, so that pet welfare is improved and requests for euthanasia for convenience may be minimised.

Professionals can also discuss the issue rationally and carefully, and try to understand the client’s reason behind the request. Often the request may be down to a question of money, such as if an owner can no longer afford a pet, or lack of awareness, such as the option for rehoming, for example, and once the reason behind a request is understood, a mutually acceptable decision may be made, instead of immediately agreeing to kill the pet.

(Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing, p54)

It may well be time for veterinary and veterinary nursing professionals to push for more consideration for the animals they are treating, both within society and within their own profession.

One approach to this in practice itself may perhaps be the concept of conscientious objection. When a veterinary professional chooses not to carry out a requested convenience euthanasia, the possibility of conscientious objection in practice is very real, and it could well be argued that the RCVS governing body should aim to allow for this, and indeed support it.

As Wicclair explains, regarding allowing exemption from certain acts due to conscience, “not granting exemptions may promote ethical insensitivity” and that “granting exemptions can serve as a catalyst for improving the ethical environment…” and that denying “requests for conscience based exemptions fails to respect, and threatens to undermine….moral autonomy and moral integrity”.


To ignore the importance of moral integrity in the veterinary and veterinary nursing profession would be a mistake. Rollin’s concept of moral stress is integral to this, for to the professional whose job should be the care of companion animals, demands for unwarranted killing can have a very negative effect.

As Wicclair says, “a loss of moral integrity can be devastating. It can result in strong feelings of guilt, remorse, and shame as well as a loss of self-respect…”.

As such, the professionals should be supported in their ethical considerations and given both the education in ethics and the support from their governing body when they do object to certain procedures that may currently be considered the norm in veterinary practice. In this way they have the chance to apply animal ethics in their practical day to day lives and not only maintain their professionalism but help progress the profession ethically as a whole.
Certainly, the Veterinary and veterinary nursing professions need to look to the future and make a conscious effort to assess their own ethical stances on major issues of animal suffering and animal killing that is currently ingrained in the status quo but controversial in essence.

Conscious ethical evaluation and reflection, and proper ethical training for professionals is needed so the professions can take the lead in the future of animal ethics and its application in practice.

The professions should be pushing for social change and for changes in legislation that protect animals and prevent unnecessary harms being done to them.

Veterinary and veterinary nursing professionals are ideally placed to lead by example and by educating the public they work for to help make very real and significant changes to the lives and welfare of the animals they care for.

Conclusion

The veterinary and veterinary nursing profession need to take their positions as the leaders in the changes needed in society to improve the lives of the animals they care for and have responsibility for. For too long the professions have maintained the status quo, and instead it needs to be ever questioning it and making every effort to ensure the best for the animals it has pledged to protect, and address the issues of ethical concern that are rife within modern society.

As one veterinary journal article pleads,

"We must grasp the nettle and resolve these problems by discussing and arguing and the sooner we do so the better. If we don't, I believe that in not so many years from now our descendants will look back on some of our practices with the same disdain as we look back on those of our ancestors".

References and Further Reading

- Yeates, James (2013), Animal Welfare in Veterinary Practice, Sussex, Published by Wiley Blackwell for The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
- Rollin, B. (2006), An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics, Theory and Cases, Iowa, Blackwell Publishing.