



AW7000: ANIMALS AND SOCIETY

ASSIGNMENT FOUR

APPLIED ETHICS: A VETERINARY DILEMMA

SEMINAR REFLECTION WEEK 6: AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY AND ANIMAL ETHICS

Author: Helen Brown

APPLIED ETHICS: A VETERINARY DILEMMA



This essay will reflect on an ethical problem from the author's own experience. The situation surrounds an emergency request for euthanasia of an aggressive dog. The dog, an eight year old large male cross-breed, had been in the owner's possession for most of its life, and had always been exercised alone at night, muzzled, due to inter-dog aggression. Five weeks earlier, the owner had bought two puppies, and the older dog's aggression had escalated to biting human family members. The owner had trapped the dog in a room and was afraid to enter. He called the police, who caught the dog and brought it to the clinic.

WHO ARE THE INTERESTED PARTIES?

Interested parties in this situation are the dog, the owner, the veterinary staff, the police officers, the clinic directors and the public.

WHAT ARE THEIR INTERESTS?

The dog has an interest in staying alive, whether it knows it or not. This dog had reached approximately 70% of its life expectancy. Its interests also include freedom from suffering and freedom to express normal behaviour. It could be argued that its escalating aggression was a "normal" behavioural response to its circumstances, for this individual (Donaldson, 2013). It could be inferred from the history and presentation that it had been suffering mentally for some time, though physical examination was limited to visual assessment.

The owner's interest is primarily the safety of his family, as well as wider concerns of public safety. He should also be concerned for the that the dog is humanely treated whatever the outcome, in accordance with his responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (Sweeney, 2016).

The veterinary staff have obligations to the welfare of the dog presented to them as a patient. There is the moral stress of killing animals in general, and in these circumstances in particular, to consider, plus concern for their own safety when handling a large aggressive dog.

The police officers' interests are in public and personal safety. Dog welfare is not their primary consideration, and nor is prosecution as the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 did not apply (Sweeney, 2016).

The clinic directors have interests in the health and safety of their employees, and in public relations issues surrounding such a sensitive dilemma. Economic factors are not a major interest here, but there is a high time and welfare cost in taking staff away from other patients.

The public interest is as tax payers funding the police force. Also, in not being bitten, and arguably a wider moral interest in the welfare and behaviour of dogs in society.

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION?

One course of action would be to request that the owner collects the dog and seeks professional behavioural help. After interviewing the owner, the judgement was made that this option would not be in the dog's best interest as his skills and willingness to address the issue were unsatisfactory.

Aside from the immediate fate of the dog, it could be argued that this owner committed an offence under the AWA. The dog's history reflects an absence of socialisation, a failure to seek treatment for aggression (which may have been underscored by physical disease), and finally an introduction of threats to the dog's well-being by the introduction of conspecifics, combining to cause unnecessary suffering. Regardless of intention, the law requires the actions of a "reasonable person" who either knew, or ought to have known, that their actions would cause suffering (Radford, 2016). In reality a prosecution in this case would have been remarkable due to the burden of proof and also the sheer frequency of situations like this. It is not practical to prosecute every owner who causes suffering by having a poor understanding of canine needs; legal recourse is reserved for more severe cases, especially since the penalties are so mild.



An option to avoid humane destruction in this case would be to attempt to find a place for the dog in a re-homing centre equipped for long term behavioural cases. However, these are rare, and tend to focus on dogs able to cohabit with others (Dogs Trust, 2016). There was also acute time pressure as the dog was held in a police vehicle. Admission as an in-patient would present an unacceptable risk to other patients and staff, with a negligible chance of finding a shelter place.

The final possible course of action is to destroy the dog as requested. This is not a risk-free option with a large aggressive dog: there is a balance to be struck between animal welfare and human safety.

WHAT, IF ANY, LEGAL OR PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE EXISTS?

A veterinarian's first obligation is to act on behalf of the patient (RCVS, 2016). While euthanasia to relieve intractable suffering is fairly uncontroversial, the potential for future suffering in this case was not sufficiently determined. If behavioural disorders are held to the same standard as physical conditions, the suffering was acute. However, euthanasia is not always carried out in cases of acute suffering, if it can be relieved to a degree that allows establishment of an improved prognosis.

THE DECISION

It was judged that the animal's best interests would be served by euthanasia. Although full behavioural assessment was not possible, the aggression was long-standing and untreated; any modification would have been prolonged and only partially successful. Given the pressure on dog shelters, and the re-homing prospects for this individual, it was felt that to attempt this would be more likely to inflict further unacceptable stress. The police involvement in this case makes anything other than euthanasia a risky option for a veterinary professional, even if not legally required to do it.

MINIMISING NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

The negative consequences primarily involve the dog. It was not possible to give oral sedatives, so the dog was restrained by 'dog-catcher' and sedated by intramuscular injection. However, the process was as brief as possible without risking human safety, and the dog was left to fall asleep peacefully, followed by euthanasia while unconscious.

An underrated impact of this situation is the stress, both physical and moral, on the professionals involved. This applies more to the veterinary staff than police officers since they are highly motivated, often vocationally inspired, to help animals. This stress was minimised by the knowledge that humane destruction was in the dog's best interests in this case, although this was tempered by the fact that human society failed the dog in a way that in theory need not happen.

REFERENCES

Dogs Trust (2016) Frequently asked questions about rehoming. Available at: <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/rehoming/faqs/> [Accessed 05/12/16].

Donaldson, J. (2013) *The Culture Clash*. 3rd Edn. Washington: Dogwise Publishing.

Radford, M. (2016) Assessment of the unnecessary suffering offence. *The Veterinary Record*, 179, 577-578.

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (2016) Code of professional conduct for veterinary surgeons. Available at: <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/> [Accessed 05/12/16].

Sweeney N (2016). *Animal Law in the UK*. University of Winchester.