

Ethically challenging situations that may arise in shelter, pound, animal rescue or animal welfare organisation settings for veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses – Full Paper

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As the work presented at Getting 2 Zero forms part of a body of work that will be submitted for publication towards my PhD. I have not provided a complete draft here. If you have questions about methodology, please email anne.fawcett@sydney.edu.au

Introduction

Ethically challenging situations, also referred to as ethical or moral dilemmas, are common in veterinary settings (Batchelor and McKeegan 2012, Crane, Phillips et al. 2015, Kipperman, Morris et al. 2018, Moses, Malowney et al. 2018) and may cause moral stress or moral distress.

Moral distress has been defined as ‘The experience of psychological distress that results from engaging in, or failing to prevent, decisions or behaviours that transgress, or come to transgress, personally held moral or ethical beliefs’ (Crane, Bayl-Smith et al. 2013). In other words, moral stress is said to occur when one knows the “right” thing to do, but is unable to act due to external or organisational constraints. The term first emerged in the human nursing literature, but was first used in the veterinary literature to describe the unique stressors experienced by those working in shelters (Rollin 1986), especially in relation to the destruction of healthy or treatable animals. He later explained:

“...this kind of stress grows out of the radical conflict between one’s reasons for entering the field of animal work, and what one in fact ends up doing... imagine the psychological impact of constant demands to kill healthy animals for appalling reasons: ‘the dog is too old to run with me anymore; we have redecorated, and the dog no longer matches the colour scheme; it is cheaper to get another dog when I return from vacation than to pay the fees for a boarding kennel’, and, most perniciously, ‘I do not wish to spend the money on the procedure you recommend to treat the animal’ or ‘it is cheaper to get another dog’” (Rollin 2011).

This type of stress may lead to high turnover. One reason cited for leaving employment by veterinarians and veterinary nurses is a perceived lack of alignment between one’s personal values and the values in one’s workplace (Page-Jones and Abbey 2015).

Even more concerningly, veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses are occupational groups at risk of psychological distress, suicidal ideation and suicide (Gardner and Hini 2006, Cohen 2007, Bartram and Baldwin 2008, Hansez, Schins et al. 2008, Bartram, Yadegarfar et al. 2009, Bartram and Baldwin 2010, Platt, Hawton et al. 2010, Black, Winefield et al. 2011, Hatch, Winefield et al. 2011, Platt, Hawton et al. 2012, Wallace 2014, Crane, Phillips et al. 2015, Milner, Niven et al. 2015, Scotney, McLaughlin et al. 2015, Deacon and Brough 2017, Lloyd and Campion 2017, Wallace 2017, Polachek and Wallace 2018). It has been argued that stress arising from ethically challenging situations may contribute to mental health related morbidity and mortality in veterinary professionals (Rollin 2011).

Types of ethically challenging situations that may arise in shelter, pound, animal rescue or animal welfare organisation settings for veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses

As part of my research for my PhD, I compiled hypothetical ethically challenging situations published in veterinary, technician and nursing journals as well as veterinary, technician and nursing textbooks on ethics. All scenarios were read by the first author. Scenarios containing

a reference to “shelter”, “pound”, “rescue”, “animal welfare organisation” and/or “charity” were flagged for in-depth review.

In total, from a pool of 675 relevant hypothetical ethically challenging scenarios from literature spanning 29 years, I flagged for in-depth review 34 scenarios that made a reference to “shelter”, “pound”, “rescue”, “animal welfare organisation” and/or “charity”. Thus ethically challenging situations based in shelter, pound, animal rescue or animal welfare organisation settings represented 5 per cent of hypothetical ethical scenarios published.

Most of these scenarios were written from the perspective of veterinarians or veterinary practice owners (18/34) or an unspecified staff member (11/34), with fewer written from the perspective of veterinary nurses or animal health technicians (3/34), students (1/34) or educators (1/34).

The types of ethically challenging situations encountered by veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses in shelter, pound, animal rescue or animal welfare organisation settings discussed in published hypothetical ethically challenging scenarios are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of ethically challenging situations encountered by veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses in shelter, pound, animal rescue or animal welfare organisation settings discussed in published hypothetical ethically challenging scenarios

Source/s	Ethically challenging situations
(Rollin 2004) (Rollin 2015) (Rosenberg 2015)	Is it acceptable to rehome shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation animals to less than ideal homes (if humane killing is the alternative)?
(Rollin 2012) (Rosenberg 2015)	Is it acceptable for those with financial means to take advantage of low-cost procedures offered by shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation facilities?
(Green 2007) (Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	Can a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation make provision of low-cost surgery conditional upon performing surgical neutering/spaying?
(Ashall 2014)	When is it acceptable for a “no-kill” shelter to humanely kill or euthanase animals? What if it transitions to an open-admission policy?
(Brown 2016)	Is it acceptable for a shelter/rescue/pound/animal welfare organisation facility to perform legal cosmetic surgeries on animals? (for example, tail-docking or ear-cropping where this is legal)
(Brown 2016)	Should you refuse to perform a procedure against your beliefs if another veterinarian will perform the procedure anyway?
(Coghlan 2018)	Should a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation veterinarian humanely kill an aggressive animal (surrendered for this reason) if an experienced owner is willing to provide a suitable home?
(Fawcett and Brailey 2012)	Should shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisations humanely kill asymptomatic animals that are seropositive for an infectious disease?
(Fawcett and Chadwick 2018)	Should shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation staff manipulate perceived irresponsible owners into surrendering treatable or rehome-able animals?
(Fordyce 2017)	Should shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation staff members or students adopt animals to facilitate treatment if owners cannot afford to treat?

(Goeree and Rollin 2008)	Should a private practice veterinarian perform a procedure if an animal was rehomed by a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare on the condition that this procedure is not performed? (example: declawing where legal)
(McNeil and Rollin 2012)	Should you follow a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation policy if the letter of that policy would necessitate the destruction of an animal you personally do not believe should be destroyed?
(Mills 2016)	Should a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation perform a simple treatment in an unhandleable animal (example: feral kitten).
(Mullan 2006)	Should you conscientiously object to spaying a pregnant female if it would prevent the animal and her offspring from being admitted to a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation?
(Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	Is the use of cadavers sourced from shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisations for teaching ethical if the animals were euthanased for other reasons?
(Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	Should students gain experience working with shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisations that may not operate ethically?
(Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	Should shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation animals be able to be used as source animals for organ transplantation if their adoption is thus guaranteed?
(Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	Is animal death, if brought about humanely, a welfare issue?
(Mullan and Fawcett 2017)	How should intractable suffering be managed in shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation settings where euthanasia is not permitted?
(Roberts and Rollin 2003)	To what extent, if any, should private veterinary practices perform low- or no- cost work for shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisations?
(Rosenberg 2015)	Should veterinarians seek to influence shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation adoption policies on animal welfare grounds?
(Rollin 2011)	How do veterinarians manage cases where an animal welfare organisation complains about the welfare of an animal under their treatment?
(Rollin 2013)	Should veterinarians provide low-cost veterinary care to dogs and cats on farms that would otherwise receive no care?
(Rollin 2016)	Should shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation veterinarians be held to account for a missed or misdiagnosis if required to provide care on a shoestring budget?
(Rosenberg 2013)	Should a veterinarian humanely kill an animal that would likely be accepted by a shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation for rehoming, to honour a client's wish?
(Rosenberg 2014)	Is a veterinary practice responsible for negative comments about organisations linked to on its site?
(Rosenberg 2017)	Are shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisations or private practice veterinarians responsible for misadventure/escape of an animal rehomed to a client in an insecure carrier?
(Rosenberg 2017)	Should an employee be restricted from protesting about animal welfare issues pertaining to neighbouring businesses?
(Walsh 2016)	How should one respond when employees badmouth shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation volunteers to colleagues who are hiring?

What may help?

A number of approaches to navigating ethically challenging situations have been described, most of which involve identifying stakeholders (those impacted by decisions), gathering available data and evidence, and applying one or more ethical frameworks (Mullan and Fawcett 2017). Because these involve discussion, all members of the team have an opportunity to discuss their concerns.

It may not be possible to discuss ethically challenging situations before they are resolved, but discussions may focus on how such a situation could or would be managed differently.

Example 1:

Ethically challenging situation:

Is it acceptable to rehome shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation animals to less than ideal homes (if humane killing is the alternative)? (**Rollin 2004, Rollin 2015, Rosenberg 2015**)

Stakeholders:

- Animals housed in shelters/pounds/rescue or animal welfare organisations
- Staff at these organisations
- Potential adopters
- The community
- The environment (including wildlife)

Framework: David Fraser's "practical" ethic for animals

David Fraser's practical ethic is based on four principles:

1. "To provide good lives for animals in our care
2. To treat suffering with compassion
3. To be mindful of unseen harm
4. To protect the life sustaining processes and balances of nature" (Fraser 2012)

What data or evidence should we consider?

1. What is a "good life" for the animals in our care? Which welfare needs can be met in their current setting? Which can be met in the "less than ideal" homes? How many animals does the shelter admit? What is the admission policy? How many animals does the shelter rehome? What is the average length of stay? What is the impact of the length of stay on the animals' welfare?
2. To what degree may animals suffer in their current setting? To what degree may they suffer in "less than ideal" homes? To what degree can that suffering be prevented by strategies, for example education, resources? To what extent are staff suffering? To what extent do persons who wish to adopt animals suffer if they cannot adopt animals? To what extent do community member suffer if animals are housed in less than ideal homes? (e.g. nuisance behaviour of animals, escape, failure to clean up after animals).
3. What are the potential harms of rehoming animals to less than ideal homes? (e.g. increase in nuisance or cruelty complaints). What are the potential harms of rehoming animals only to ideal or close to ideal homes? (e.g. increase in length of stay and reduced adoptability of animals; limited intake or stretching beyond capacity to care).
4. What are the potential environmental impacts of stray and unwanted animals? What are the potential environmental impacts of animals owned by "less than ideal" owners

(including impacts on wildlife)? What is the environmental impact of the shelter and how might these be altered if the approach to adopting is varied?

Example 2:

Ethically challenging situation:

Is it acceptable for those with financial means to take advantage of low-cost procedures offered by shelter/pound/rescue/animal welfare organisation facilities? **(Rollin 2012) (Rosenberg 2015)**

Stakeholders:

- Animal patients
- Staff at organisations offering low-cost procedures
- Private veterinary practice owners
- Pet owners with financial means
- Pet owners without financial means
- The community
- The environment

Framework: utilitarian (seeking the greatest benefit for the greatest number of stakeholders)/cost benefit analysis(Mullan and Fawcett 2017).

What factors should be considered?

I've outlined an example table of possible costs and benefits for each stakeholder below. It is important to discuss which consequences are most significant, and which are most likely, given the available evidence (this might include shelter statistics including client demographics) and financial statements.

Table 2. Potential costs and benefits of allowing those with financial means to take advantage of low-cost procedures

Stakeholder	Possible costs	Possible benefits
Animals	<p>If there are too many demands, longer wait/more rushed surgery</p> <p>If low-cost procedures performed by less experienced vets, may increase risk of surgical morbidity, mortality, delay recovery</p>	<p>May be more likely to have necessary procedures due to lower cost barrier, and therefore enjoy better health/welfare</p> <p>Owners with means may have more funds to invest in other welfare needs e.g. food, flea and tick prophylaxis etc.</p>
Staff at organisations offering low-cost procedures	<p>May have to cope with increased case load</p> <p>Owners with means may expect higher standard of care than some organisations can provide</p>	<p>Higher case load may increase experience/skill set</p> <p>Exposure of organisation and good work to clients with means may attract potential volunteers/supporters/donors</p>

	<p>May be utilising funds to subsidise procedures that are needed elsewhere</p> <p>Servicing clients with means may not be the mission of these organisations</p>	
Private veterinary practice owners	<p>May feel prices are undercut by low-cost services, may lose potential income</p> <p>May be less likely to support these organisations if seen as competition</p> <p>May experience reduced case load and thus reduced experience</p>	<p>May have time freed to perform more advanced care</p> <p>Clients who are familiar with a spectrum of care may appreciate private practice more</p> <p>May have reduced moral stress/distress if there is somewhere to refer clients with limited financial means which may outweigh costs of lost opportunities to treat patients owned by clients with financial means</p>
Pet owners with limited financial means	<p>May have to compete with clients with financial means in terms of availability of services</p> <p>Clients with means may drive up costs of low-cost facilities</p>	<p>May benefit from improved services if clients with financial means support low-cost care providers</p>
The community	<p>May not have access to as many private veterinary services if they are not well supported</p>	<p>May still benefit overall from widely available accessible care as this may improve health and welfare of all owned animals, for example by normalising neutering/spaying or providing veterinary care</p>
The environment		<p>Clients who are cost conscious may be more likely to have pets neutered or spayed, thus less stray/unwanted/roaming animals</p>

These issues can be discussed among stakeholders. Some consequences may be more significant, or more likely to occur, than others.

Where to from here?

As part of my PhD research I plan to survey veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses about the types of ethically challenging situations they encounter. This

information will be helpful in planning curricula and training, to better equip those working in the veterinary profession to cope with the most common and most stressful ethically challenging situations.

If certain ethically challenging situations occur repeatedly, it can be useful to develop policies to address these.

A number of interventions have been trialled to reduce moral stress and distress. Allowing people to raise ethical concerns may be an opportunity to address those concerns, correct any misconceptions, consider all options and allow everyone's voices to be heard (Fordyce 2017, Camp and Sadler 2019). The formation of an ethics committee may be possible in some settings (Rosoff, Moga et al. 2018). Alternatively, ethics rounds may provide a helpful forum to discuss and devise strategies for navigating ethically challenging situations (Svantesson, et al. 2008, Watts, Parker et al. 2013, Silén, Ramklint et al. 2014).

The first author will pilot ethics rounds as part of her PhD research, to determine if this is helpful and whether it improves ethical reasoning.

If you are interested in learning more about this project, please contact me:
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