



Ethical question of the month — September 2001

Veterinarians have refused to euthanize a companion animal when the reason for euthanasia is that the owner no longer needs or desires the animal's companionship. Most working animals, on the other hand, are killed when they can no longer work or when they are no longer profitable. On what should the decision to keep or kill the animal be based? Is it a matter of species, economics, or the type of service that the animal provides?

Question de déontologie du mois — septembre 2001

Des vétérinaires refusent d'euthanasier des animaux de compagnie quand leurs propriétaires ne veulent plus les garder. Par contre, la plupart des animaux de somme sont euthanasiés quand ils ne peuvent plus travailler ou qu'ils ne sont plus rentables. Sur quoi la décision de garder ou de tuer un animal devrait-elle reposer? Cette décision dépend-elle de l'espèce, de considérations économiques ou du type de service que l'animal rend?

An ethicist's commentary on the ethics of killing healthy animals

The answer to this question is not to be found in our social consensus ethic, which is essentially silent on any matter of right-to-life for other than humans. Thus, such decisions are left to a veterinarian's personal ethic, his or her own view of right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice, as these apply to animals. It may well be that, in the future, the veterinary profession will collectively adopt some ethical principles regarding these matters as part of professional ethics, but, as yet, it has not done so, and, in fact, veterinarians (as well as humane societies) are split evenly on convenience euthanasia of healthy companion animals.

The one exception to the above generalization lies in the area of laboratory animals. Most societies that have laws or rules governing the treatment of laboratory animals mandate early endpoints (euthanasia) for animals used in experiments entailing pain and distress, and, in some countries, euthanasia is mandatory for animals experiencing intractable pain. As I have pointed out before in these columns, such laws set the legal standard of veterinary practice and, at least, tell us that a suffering animal, regardless of the purpose for which it used, is entitled to a "good death" to end that suffering.

But what of a healthy animal — dog, cat, horse, bird, zoo animal — that is not suffering? What principles, in such a case, might guide a conscientious veterinarian? I do not believe that any of the considerations listed in the question provide an adequate moral guide for the veterinarian, for neither species, use, nor economics provides morally relevant reasons to veterinarians who believe, in response to what, elsewhere, I have called the "Fundamental Question of Veterinary Medicine"(1), that their primary obligation is to the animal rather than the owner, and that part of their primary job is to

save life. To go against one's own moral commitments on such an issue is to invite what we have called moral stress, arising out of discordance between what one believes one ought to do and what one is in fact doing. Moral stress, as I have noted before, is highly erosive of physical and mental well-being, as well as job satisfaction. To such a veterinarian, only the amelioration of suffering provides a good reason for killing.

Thus, to such a practitioner there is never a good reason for killing a healthy animal. Such a veterinarian should, therefore, work to find alternatives to killing. For example, in the equine area, veterinarians have worked with others to find homes for animals that are incapable of performing their humanly designated function, such as racing, but are still capable of reasonable quality of life. Some horses no longer able to race can be used in riding programs, or returned to live out their lives on "retirement" farms.

For veterinarians who do not, in their personal ethic, see animal life as morally requiring preservation, the issue is clear; animals may be killed at an owner's behest. The only issue for them is assuring that death is indeed painless. Such veterinarians are morally culpable, if they save the owners money at the expense of animal suffering, as when, for reasons of cost, infusion of disinfectant is used for killing horses. By and large the AVMA guidelines for euthanasia provide valuable guidance in avoiding "bad deaths"(2).

References

1. Rollin BE. Veterinary Medical Ethics — Theory and Cases. Ames: Iowa State Univ Pr, 1999:32-35.
2. American Veterinary Medical Association. 1993 Report of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia. J Am Vet Med Assoc 1993;202:229-249.

Bernard E. Rollin, PhD

**Ethical question of the month —
December 2001**

Responses to the case presented are welcome. Please limit your reply to approximately 50 words and mail along with your name and address to: **Ethical Choices, c/o Dr. Tim Blackwell, Veterinary Science, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Wellington Place, R.R.#1, Fergus, Ontario N1M 2W3; telephone: (519) 846-3413; fax: (519) 846-8101.** Suggested ethical questions of the month are also welcome! All ethical questions or scenarios in the ethics column are based on actual events, which are changed, including names, locations, species, etc., to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved.

Should private veterinary practitioners be allowed to produce autogenous vaccines or compound antimicrobial products for use in food producing animals?

Comments/Commentaires : _____

Name/Nom : _____

Address/Adresse : _____

**Question de déontologie
du mois — décembre 2001**

*Les réponses au cas présenté sont les bienvenues. Veuillez limiter votre réponse à environ 50 mots et nous la faire parvenir par la poste avec vos nom et adresse à l'adresse suivante : **Choix déontologiques, a/s du Dr Tim Blackwell, Science vétérinaire, ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales de l'Ontario, R.R. 1, Fergus (Ontario) N1M 2W3; téléphone : (519) 846-3413; télécopieur : (519) 846-8101.** Les propositions de questions déontologiques sont toujours bienvenues! Toutes les questions et situations présentées dans cette chronique s'inspirent d'événements réels dont nous modifions certains éléments, comme les noms, les endroits ou les espèces, pour protéger l'anonymat des personnes en cause.*

Les praticiens privés devraient-ils être autorisés à produire des autovaccins ou des composés antimicrobiens à administrer aux animaux destinés à l'alimentation?



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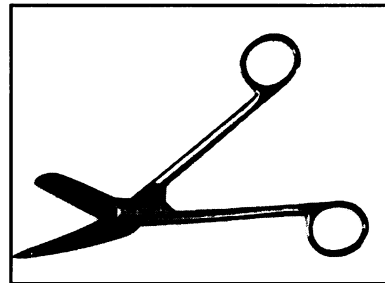
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