Survey of the frequency and perceived stressfulness of ethical dilemmas encountered in UK veterinary practice

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Context
Veterinary surgeons regularly face ethical dilemmas, in which the interests of animals and clients may conflict. Research on the mental health consequences of continually facing challenging decisions in day-to-day practice for veterinary surgeons is limited, and there is no published information on the common scenarios encountered, their frequency and whether veterinary surgeons find them stressful. It is also not clear whether factors such as sex, type of practice and level of experience are influential. This study sought to provide baseline data on the scale of the ethical challenges faced by veterinary surgeons.

Main conclusion
This study provides data on the scale of the ethical challenges faced by first-opinion veterinary surgeons in the UK. It reveals that veterinary surgeons experience difficult ethical dilemmas regularly (one to five per week) and rate three common dilemmas as highly stressful. The data also show that women find some dilemmas more stressful than men, and that years of experience do not necessarily make these situations any easier to handle. No difference was seen in the reported number of dilemmas experienced per week between the sexes, nor in different types of practice. The most common dilemma faced was financial limitations restricting treatment options, but this was rated as less stressful than convenience euthanasia of a healthy animal or a client wishing to continue treatment despite compromised animal welfare or quality of life.

Approach
A short questionnaire was completed by 58 practising veterinary surgeons. Respondents were asked to report how frequently they faced ethical dilemmas, and to rate on a simple numerical scale (0 Not at all stressful to 10 Extremely stressful) how stressful they found each of three common scenarios, which were all assumed to be ethically problematic. The scenarios were convenience euthanasia of a healthy animal, financial limitations of the client restricting the treatment options, and the client wishing to continue treatment despite compromised animal welfare/quality of life. The respondents were also asked which of the three provided ethical dilemmas they most commonly faced and whether they had received adequate training in ethics while at university.

Results
Of the 58 respondents, 43 were female and 15 were male. They had variable levels of experience in practice, ranging from one year to over 25 years. Most of the veterinary surgeons surveyed spent the majority of their time in small animal practice. The majority of respondents (57 per cent) reported that they faced one or two ethical dilemmas per week, with 34 per cent stating that they faced three to five dilemmas per week; two reported facing more than 10 ethical dilemmas per week, and three respondents stated they faced none. The median stress ratings for each dilemma were 8 (healthy animal euthanasia), 7 (financial limitations) and 9 (client wishing to continue treatment).

Thus, a client wishing to continue treatment despite poor animal welfare or quality of life was rated as the most stressful, but the other two scenarios were also rated as highly stressful. No effect of the number of years in practice or the type of practice was found in relation to the stress ratings. A significant sex difference was observed in stress ratings for the scenarios ‘healthy animal euthanasia’ (P=0.022) and ‘client wishing to continue treatment’ (P=0.014), with women rating these dilemmas as more stressful than men. No difference was seen in the reported number of dilemmas experienced per week between the sexes, or in the different types of practice. The most common dilemma faced by the respondents was financial limitations restricting treatment options. Of 55 respondents, 78 per cent reported they felt they had had inadequate training on ethics during their veterinary degree.

Interpretation
Determination of the frequency of dilemmas encountered by veterinary surgeons depends on the assumption that they are able to recognise ethical dilemmas. The ability to recognise ethical issues within a problem is known as ethical sensitivity, and there are no reported data on this attribute in veterinary surgeons. Therefore, as well as recording actual differences in the frequency of encountered dilemmas, the results may have been affected by differing levels of ethical sensitivity causing differences in the number of dilemmas reported. In addition, it is clear that there are differences of opinion on what constitutes a moral problem in veterinary medicine. Veterinary surgeons differ in their ethical views, and some will oppose actions that others would happily carry out.

The authors suspected that repeated exposure to dilemmas (as assumed by increased years of experience) might have been related to a reduction in the stress caused by these situations, but this was not the case. It would appear, therefore, that coping with ethically challenging situations is not necessarily self-taught or improved by repetition.

In two of the presented scenarios (client wishing to continue treatment and healthy animal euthanasia), women reported the situation to be more stressful than men. Previous studies have discovered similar sex differences despite the finding that females tend to score higher than males on standardised tests of ethical reasoning. This result may be due to increased susceptibility to emotional stress in females as a result of greater empathy or appreciation of the human-animal bond.

Significance of findings
These data provide a starting point, but more research examining the ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning abilities of veterinary surgeons is needed. On a practical level, these findings suggest that there is an urgent need for ethics educational tools and approaches specifically designed with veterinary surgeons in mind. Such training should help to reduce the stress experienced by veterinary surgeons as they negotiate ethical dilemmas, and should also facilitate sound decision making, which forms the basis of morally justifiable animal and client care.