



Drawing the line in clinical treatment of companion animals: recommendations from an ethics working party

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Introduction

Advances in veterinary medicine have led to an increase in the number of potential treatment options available and clinicians must decide on the most appropriate approach. Interventions causing short-term harm, but ultimately benefiting the animal, are often justified as being in the 'animal's best interest'. However, highly invasive clinical veterinary procedures with high morbidity and low success rates may not be in the animal's best interest.

A working party consisting of five European College of Veterinary Anaesthesia and Analgesia (ECVAA) diplomates and an ethicist was set up by the ECVAA to discuss

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This is a summary of a paper that is published in full at veterinaryrecord.bvpublications.com

Published Online First 30 March 2018

Veterinary Record (2018) 182, 664. Cite as doi:

10.1136/vr.104559

KEY FINDINGS

- 'Just because you can doesn't mean you should': doing everything technically possible in diagnosing and treating disease may not be in the animal's best interest.
- An interdisciplinary team approach is recommended for making clinical decisions in complex, ethically challenging cases.
- The Veterinary Ethical Tool can help to identify and collate ethical considerations for or against particular treatment options.

the ethics of clinical veterinary practice and provide recommendations to improve the approach to ethically challenging clinical cases.

Approach

A literature search for publications on clinical veterinary ethics was conducted. The working party reflected on modern day veterinary ethics in companion animal cases and explored options for managing ethically challenging cases. Open questions were used to establish the principal moral foundations under which the veterinary

clinician should work. The process was carried out via telephone conferences, email-based electronic discussions and one face-to-face meeting.

Results

Clinical interventions with the potential to cause harm need ethical justification, and the working group suggest a comparable structure of ethical reflection to that used in the context of in vivo research should be applied to the clinical setting.

To structure the ethical debate, pertinent questions for ethical decision making were identified. These questions were incorporated into a prototype veterinary ethical tool (VET) developed to facilitate clinical ethical decision making (see full paper).

Interpretation

The ethical question 'Where should the line on treatment be drawn' should be replaced by 'How should the line be drawn?'. The investigation outlines an approach to facilitate clinicians' decision making. The VET is currently a prototype and its use in clinical cases is under investigation.

Significance of findings

Fundamental moral and ethical principles can be used to decide whether proposed treatment is in the patient's best interest and therefore justifiable.