

Editorial

Should we be truly customer-centric?

'I PROMISE and solemnly declare that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, above all, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care.'

That's the oath sworn by vets on admission into the profession.

It makes clear that, while vets have responsibilities towards clients, colleagues and the general public, their primary concern is with ensuring the health and welfare of the animals under their care.

'Treat the animal in front of you', as the saying goes. Sounds simple. But what if there's a clash between an animal owner's wants and his or her animal's needs?

In such a scenario the animal's needs should take precedence – yet a problem arises as to how, precisely, one enables that to happen.

By way of illustration, consider the example of an owner who feeds his or her cats a vegan diet. That owner could be committing a crime under the Animal Welfare Act, which obliges owners to provide their pets with a suitable diet (cats, being obligate carnivores, die due to taurine deficiency if they go vegan).

Treating the owner as a criminal could shock them into compliance, thereby enabling better welfare, but it might equally have the opposite effect. They might feel 'judged', become defensive and entrenched, or be scared off from engaging with vets at all, leading, no doubt, to further deleterious consequences for their long-suffering cats.

What if one were to explore with the owner the question of why they are feeding their cat an inappropriate diet in the first place? What are the underlying reasons and could some compromise solution be found? Or does meeting such owners halfway merely serve to validate and encourage harmful practices?

This is an extreme example, but ethical quandaries such as this were touched upon at an Oxford Union-style debate hosted by the RCVS at its ViVet innovation symposium in Salford this week.

The motion was: 'In order to thrive the veterinary

profession must become truly "customer-centric".'

Proposing the motion were BVA past president Gudrun Ravetz and Vets: Stay, Go, Diversify founder Ebony Escalona; countering it were independent consultant vet Iain Richards and former RCVS president Lynne Hill.

Ravetz and Escalona argued that if vets are not sufficiently accommodating of customers' individual needs, those customers will take their custom – and their pets – elsewhere, to Dr Google or to non-vets.

'This is not about blindly doing everything the customer wants,' Ravetz insisted, adding that she wanted vets to avoid being 'paternalistic' so as to 'have dialogue' with customers and 'bring them along' with best practice.

However, Richards and Hill argued that if vets went too far towards meeting customers' needs, they would end up undermining themselves – both clinically and in terms of work/life balance.

'If you want to be completely and totally customer-centric, you could end up vaccinating people's pets at 3 am because that suits them because they've just come off a night shift or are going on a night shift, for example,' Hill said.

Richards added that there needs to be clear limits to how far vets will go, insisting it is paramount that the profession remains 'evidence led'.

A vote was taken before the debate. Of those in the audience who voted (some abstained), 35 were 'for' and six 'against' the motion. After hearing from the speakers, the 'for' side had lost ground (although still retained a majority). The second vote delivered a result of 24 'for' and 14 'against.'

Chair George Gunn described this as a win for both sides – meaning, presumably, that both arguments hold elements of truth.

Josh Loeb



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