

Veterinary Medical Ethics- A Spectrum of Gray

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This case is a great example of how veterinary ethics are implicated in many levels of veterinary medicine. From the formation and revision of federal and state laws, to the daily decisions made by veterinarians in all types of private and public practices every day, ethics play a key role in the outcomes of a variety of situations. The guidelines for the ethics used in this decision-making process are a collaboration of legal, societal, and personal standards that are different for every individual.

The two questions asked in this exercise should be approached separately. “What ethical issues are in play?” is an objective question. One can specifically point out several aspects of the scenario in which an individual’s ethics or morals would play a role in his or her opinion regarding how to respond to the situation. However, the answer to the question of, “How should Robin proceed?” is a subjective one. Every individual has an ethical and moral code that is unique. This code determines that individual’s decisions.

There are a number of ethical issues in play in the outlined scenario. Each of the following five points will be addressed both individually and together as a whole.

- 1) Lack of legal obligation to report animal abuse
- 2) Lack of protection from lawsuit
- 3) Robin’s obligation to her new employer
- 4) Dr. V’s obligation to family members vs. obligation to family’s dog
- 5) Defining animal abuse

Firstly, legally, Robin is not bound by law to report the suspected abuse to the authorities. This places the decision-making purely in the hands of Robin, and forces her to use objectivity despite a situation full of gray areas. It places more emphasis on the opinions of her colleagues,

which in this situation, may pressure her to not report the incident. However, it also gives Robin freedom to exercise her own judgement in the manner and proceed how she feels is most appropriate in this specific situation. Involving the authorities can be a very useful and necessary measure, but the definition of, “animal abuse,” varies widely. In this example, all we are told is that Robin suspects abuse. Depending on the severity of the situation, Robin could perhaps address the issue with the client through education and communication, and therefore not only increase the quality of life of the dog, but also improve the relationship of the veterinarian and client, if accomplished with tact and respect.

Robin’s lack of protection from lawsuit is an issue that is tied very closely with her lack of legal obligation to report the abuse. If a state government is going to legally require veterinarians to report animal abuse, protection must be provided to ensure compliance by the practitioners. Incidents of animal abuse are not black and white; they are a spectrum of gray. One way to describe the different types of companion animal abuse is to divide it into 2 different categories, physical and mental, each of which includes active maltreatment and passive neglect or ignorance. Physical abuse can also encompass commercial exploitation (fighting, experimentation, etc.)¹. The forms and severities of abuse are wide in variety and, thus, rarely can a veterinarian be completely certain that abuse is occurring. The reputational and financial damage that a lawsuit would cause may ruin a veterinarian’s practice and severely disrupt his or her career. In short, the benefit of reporting a possibly true case may not exceed the cost of reporting a possibly false case when factored into the individual ethical equation of some practitioners, therefore, making the legal obligation to report less effective.

As a new graduate, Robin is just beginning the full development of her moral and ethical compass as a veterinarian. Undoubtedly, she has had many influences throughout her life that have contributed to what she believes to be “wrong” or “right” in a situation. Some of these factors include where she grew up, what school she attended, and her family, friends, instructors, mentors, and employers. Dr. V is both her employer and colleague, and may be a mentor, and therefore may, understandably, have a strong influence on Robin’s treatment decisions. However, when Robin took the Veterinarian’s Oath, she swore that her first obligation as a veterinarian was to her patient. The Oath reads, “Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society, through the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge. I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics. I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.”² The American Veterinary Medical Association also outlines in its Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics under section II.A that, “veterinarians should first consider the needs of the patient: to relieve disease, suffering, or disability while minimizing pain or fear.”³ This means that before all else, Robin must put the dog as the number one stakeholder. She has been trained and entrusted to be the voice for her patient.

Dr. V has a long standing veterinarian/client/patient relationship with this family. This creates trust and can foster a very healthy and long-lasting partnership that successfully matches the needs of a client and their pet to the care provided to them. Unfortunately, it can make difficult conversations, such as the scenario presented, even more challenging to discuss. Fears

of offending the client or losing his or her business are valid. However, as stated previously, while working as a professional, Dr. V is first a veterinarian, and secondly a friend to the family. She must place the family's dog's health and well-being as first priority. It is her duty, especially as the practice owner, to at least examine the patient and discuss the situation brought to her attention by Robin.

The last ethical issue that will be discussed is the definition of, "animal abuse." There are many different terms used to describe the mistreatment of animals. Two of the most commonly used words are, "abuse," and, "neglect." However, these words are defined differently in different contexts. For example, in the state of Iowa code of law, "animal abuse," refers to any type of mistreatment of an animal that is not owned by the abuser, and, "animal neglect," refers to any type of mistreatment of an animal owned by the neglecter⁴. This brings to attention the carefulness with which veterinarians and lawmakers must use in their vocabulary. It also showcases the vague nature of what we can interpret from the above scenario. All that is known is that Robin, "strongly suspects animal abuse." It is not known what type of abuse she suspects (intentional vs. unintentional, physical vs. mental) or the severity of the abuse. This is important to note because it may greatly affect the course of action she decides to take in moving forward with the matter.

When looking at all five described ethical issues in one large context, it is easy to see how veterinary ethics is a field with a wide variety of personal opinions and sometimes conflicting standards. An individual is influenced by law, reputation, employers, family, friends, and his or her own personal moral and ethical guidelines. The spectrum of influences and information must be sorted, weighed, and compiled. Only after careful contemplation can the right decision be made, and what is "right" for one individual may not be "right" for another.

Executing the decision may not be easy, but each practitioner should have a decision-making process that is repeatable, reliable, consistent, and sound with the personal ethics and morals of that individual. When faced with a challenging ethical decision, a veterinarian must take the spectrum of gray and filter it into one clear shade.

The answer to the question, “How Should Robin Proceed?” is subjective. However, if one takes into account the above ethical issues, especially the references to the Veterinarian’s Oath and the AVMA’s Code of Veterinary Medical Ethics, it is apparent that some sort of action must be taken to help prevent this animal from any further pain or suffering. However, the way in which Robin proceeds is particularly dependent on the nature and type of animal abuse she suspects. In this scenario, Dr. V tells Robin that the family has, “fallen on hard times after the passing of their bread-winner.” This can lead one to assume that the abuse Robin is witnessing is likely poor body condition due to lack of family funds.

If this is the case, the first step would be to discuss Robin’s concerns with Dr. V, and ideally have her examine the dog and discuss the situation with Robin and the client. Dr. V has a long standing relationship with these clients, and therefore her opinion is likely in high regard. The client may simply be overwhelmed, overworked, and oblivious to the poor condition of the dog. Communication, diet correction, and willingness to work through the challenges of the situation with the client, rather than against them, could surprisingly result in a strengthening of the veterinary/client/patient relationship. If Dr. V refuses to see the client’s dog herself, it is Robin’s responsibility at that point to exercise her communication skills, tact, and respectfulness, to discuss the issue with the owner. If the owner has no desire to correct the problem, it is at that point that Robin may need to progress to notifying authorities of the suspected abuse if she feels this is necessary. No job is worth Robin losing her ethical and moral soundness.

This type of veterinary ethical dilemma is common and ongoing in practices across the country. It is easy to visualize these examples of micro-level decisions being made (at the level of the practitioner, as seen in this example). It is also easy to visualize veterinary ethics at a macro-level (at the level of policy and law makers). The interaction and constant change between these two divisions can be less clear. As stated by Peter Bahnson in an article for the *Iowa State University Veterinarian*, "In the minds of most people it seems that veterinary ethics is remote, extreme, or pedantic. Ethics is what brainy people do as they sit in their offices in ivory towers, or it is the "word from above" and as such is the "final" interpretation of right and wrong. At any rate, it is often felt that ethics has little to do with the real world of veterinary medicine."⁵

However, the ethical conundrums and decisions faced by individual practitioners on a daily basis provides a basic framework. Discussions of these decisions between peers of the veterinary community contributes to the formation of professional ethical guidelines. These guidelines, coupled with and representatives of the profession, eventually impact ever-changing laws and policies, and these established guidelines, laws, and policies then impact the ethical code of new and current individual practitioners. An individual's personal morals will always weigh heaviest when making black and white ethical decisions, but sound and supported professional and legal ethical code helps filter the spectrum of gray.

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