A Grey area?

An AWF Case Study

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A CASE EXPLORING THE VETERINARY TREATMENT OF GREYHOUNDS AT RACETRACKS, INCORPORATING ECONOMIC, PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

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A Grey area?

You are the duty track vet at Blankshire Greyhound Track for their Saturday evening meeting. As the leading greyhounds round the fourth and last bend into the home straight in the last race of the night, it is clear that the back-marker, a fawn bitch in the orange jacket denoting a start from Trap 5, is falling further and further behind her rivals although struggling gamely in their wake. When finally caught by the handler at the pick-up she is no longer bearing any weight on her right hind leg.

Clinical examination in the vets' room reveals gross swelling of the anterior aspect of the right tarsus with crepitus and pain evident on even the gentlest palpation. You diagnose a likely central tarsal bone fracture.

The bitch in question is four years old and was a recent purchase by the present owner, who also trains her, having been based until lately at a rather better track where she had won a couple of races in A5 Grade.

What do you advise? (continue for answers)

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- **The injured greyhound**

Central tarsal bone fractures are frequently reparable and some dogs will return to racing.

However as this bitch has only ever achieved A5 (grades are A1 to A9) she has never excelled. In addition, at four years old she is likely to be close to the end of her racing career and her past mediocre form would not encourage her use for breeding. Consequently she is unlikely to return to racing following fracture repair but, like most greyhounds, could make a good pet.

- **The owner (in this case also the trainer)**

Professional greyhound owners and trainers often regard their dogs as purely commercial rather than as pets, although owners at the small independent tracks may keep them as pets.

Consequently some owners will make any decisions purely on economic grounds – is the bitch likely to return to full racing form or be a suitable candidate for breeding? Others, who might be prepared to keep the bitch as a pet, will have a much softer attitude.

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- **Ownership syndicate**

To complicate matters many racing dogs are owned by a syndicate and taken to the track by a professional trainer. The trainer may have to get authority from the syndicate prior to giving consent to any action proposed.

- **Vet**

"…constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care." RCVS declaration

"Make animal welfare your first consideration in seeking to provide the most appropriate attention for animals committed to your care." RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons

- **Track management**

Greyhound tracks are frequently scrutinised by welfare organisations and they are particularly interested in the number of dogs injured and the numbers of dogs euthanised. Most tracks are therefore keen to minimise the number of dogs euthanised at the track to enhance their image.

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

Under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006** (or the **Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006** or **The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011**) all owners have a legal duty to provide their animal's needs as defined in the Acts. A need to be protected from pain suffering, injury and disease is one of the defined needs. There is therefore no question that the dog must be treated, although the Acts do not prevent euthanasia as a treatment, as no suffering would be caused.

Council Regulation (EC) 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport applies in UK law with the penalties being defined in the **Welfare of Animals (Transport) (England) Order (2006)** and the **Welfare of Animals (Transport) (Wales) Order 2007**. The Regulation states that animals have to be fit for transport and clearly a dog with a hock fracture is not fit. However the Regulation allows a veterinary surgeon to direct an injured animal to another veterinary surgeon for treatment.

As this is a relatively frequent issue at greyhound tracks, the **Society of Greyhound Veterinarians (SGV)** has produced a guidance document for veterinary surgeons. In addition there is an appropriate certificate for veterinary surgeons to authorise the transport of an injured dog that makes it clear what action is expected of the person in charge of the dog.

What could be done in practice?

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There is clearly a need to discuss with the owner or trainer to assess their attitude towards the future of the dog. If they are prepared to pay for the fracture to be repaired and the dog to be rehomed, appropriate analgesia should be dispensed, arrangements made with a veterinary practice and the appropriate transport certificate provided. However it may be difficult to find a practice prepared to accept the dog late at night, and particularly because it would be advantageous if there were orthopaedic expertise in the practice. Track vets are generally advised to have such contacts readily available.

If the owners are not prepared to fund the repair of the fracture, euthanasia may be the only alternative option. However the track management may be reluctant to allow euthanasia because of the PR implications. Equally the veterinary surgeon may be unwilling to euthanise a rehomeable dog with a reparable injury. The dog's welfare should be paramount and would not be best served by allowing the dog to be taken to a veterinary practice to be euthanised the following day.

What could be done in policy?

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The **Welfare of Racing Greyhounds Regulations 2010** which apply to England only were aimed at improving greyhound welfare. They require a veterinary surgeon to be present whenever dogs are raced or trialled and that the veterinary surgeon must have an appropriate area in which to work. However they do not regulate the treatment of dogs. The regulations require a record to be kept of all injuries sustained during racing.

The Greyhound Board of Great Britain (GBGB) regulates most tracks and has some concerns about the public image of the sport and particularly the numbers of dogs injured and euthanased. There has been significant political pressure on GBGB to reduce injury rates and to be able to better document the fate of dogs retiring from the sport.

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About AWF

The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) aims to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals including working and livestock animals, wildlife, and pets. We do this by focusing out charitable activities on three main areas:

Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice

Research

Debate

Education

Grant funding research which has a direct impact on animal welfare.

Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues

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