Dung deal

An AWF Case Study

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THIS CASE RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW TO ACHIEVE AN ACCEPTABLE OUTCOME FOR SOME DAIRY COWS WHILST NEGOTIATING CONFLICTING POLITICS.

Dung deal

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A dairy herd, one of the largest in the practice, is worth £17,000 turnover per annum to the practice. They have been a client for 20 years. The owner, who you haven't met, is the local NFU Chairman and a good friend of your boss. He has a very experienced herdsman, who is always a bit wary of vets, except the senior partner who he prefers to see on the farm.

You are attending a downer cow in a field of dry cows, when you notice two chronically lame cows that you saw two months ago. You had said then that both should either have a claw removed or go for slaughter. You thought they had gone. They are both practically on three legs, very thin, but bright and eating.

You mention it to the herdsman tactfully. He says his boss told him to turn them out to put on some weight before they are sent in. He says his boss had talked to your boss about them on the phone.

These cows are suffering. On the other side of the hedge of the longest side of the dry cow field is a housing estate. Your boss is on holiday for another two weeks, and hadn't mentioned any contact with the farmer at all to you.

What should you do? (continue for answers)

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- **The lame cows**

These cows are nearly non-weight bearing on their affected limbs, so are likely to be in considerable pain. They have been suffering for at least 2 months and have lost a lot of weight.

- **Owner of dairy herd and local NFU Chairman**

Alleged to have told herdsman to turn out lame cows, to put weight on. May rank commercial gain higher than animal welfare.

- **Herdsman**

Wary of vets so likely to be a communication challenge and may be difficult to reach mutual viewpoints.

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Stakeholders and relevant considerations

- **Assistant vet**

Needs to find solution without upsetting practice and client. Priority must be welfare of the two lame cows.

- **Senior veterinary partner**

Attending vet's knowledge of senior partner's views towards the subject is based on hearsay (from herdsman). Has there been a misunderstanding? Or was senior partner trying to placate his client without paying due regard to animal welfare?

- **Housing estate residents**

General public in the UK are concerned about animal welfare and many people will report animal suffering to the RSPCA. These cows are visible. Investigation by the RSPCA will be time consuming for the farmer and bad for reputation. With on-farm veterinary presence, should be able to resolve situation before RSPCA investigation becomes necessary.

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

"…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 GPC 1B

The farmer could be prosecuted under **Animal Welfare Act 2006 s. 4** (unnecessary suffering) or **s. 9** (failure to protect animals from pain, suffering, injury and disease). However, farmer may, in defence, say that the cows were under veterinary supervision and he was following veterinary advice. In which case, legal responsibility might transfer to the senior partner who had given that advice. The senior partner could also be reported to the RCVS, particularly if the client is convicted.

Attempted prosecution could arise via RSPCA investigation (perhaps via housing estate resident), or you as vet reporting the case. If vet wishes to report the client, the following **RCVS Guidance** applies: "In cases where the client has not given permission for disclosure and when the veterinary surgeon believes that animal welfare or the public interest are compromised the RCVS may be consulted before any information is divulged." **GPC 2A 2**

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Relevant legislation and professional guidance

The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 - These regulations provide for the humane treatment of animals at slaughterhouses, knackers yards and elsewhere. Relevant if a decision is made to cull the cows. Emergency Slaughter is only possible on farm in a true emergency; i.e. an unforeseen event that necessitates the slaughter of the animal. Chronically lame cattle do not count; fractured legs etc do. A chronically lame cow is therefore worthless as it is unfit to be transported to the slaughterhouse (see WATO below), and the vet must be aware of perverse incentives for the farmer to “arrange” an emergency. Carcasses must however be clean on entry to the abattoir under the Clean Livestock policy (see **BCVA Emergency Slaughter of Cattle booklet**).

The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 - Relevant if deciding whether the cows are suitable to be transported to slaughter. The Order makes no attempt to define what is and what is not acceptable. The decision whether to transport, or not, is essentially one of welfare. Due consideration must be given to the likelihood of pain or suffering during the loading and the journey. The animal must be able to bear weight on all four limbs, and there must be no likelihood of the animal suffering unnecessary pain during transport as a result of its lameness. Be aware that the motion of the vehicle and the stresses of transport may precipitate pain.

Welfare of Animals at Markets Order 1990 - The 1990 Order covers the sale of animals at livestock markets and specifically makes it an offence to present an animal at a market that is "unfit". What makes an animal "unfit" is not defined. However, Article 3 provides an interpretation of "unfit" as "in relation to an animal or bird includes infirm by virtue of being diseased, injured or fatigued".

What could be done in practice?

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The desirable end point is to ensure the cows' welfare, develop and maintain relations with the herdsman and owner, keep boss happy, stay in a job and sleep at night!

Access boss's clinical notes if possible, to see what has been discussed (has he kept adequate records?)

Must raise the cows in discussion, and not just ignore them. Ask how long they've been outside and whether they actually have put some weight on. Probably haven't, so can push toward slaughter route in conversation. If they haven't been out long enough to tell, then other tactics required.

Is treatment (claw amputation) still an option? Cows probably not sufficient economic value to justify. Rarely, some practices might allow reduced fees for surgical intervention for younger grad experience; this would at least give the cows the appropriate therapy.

If herdsman or farmer are being difficult, could consult with more experienced colleagues to see if they'll talk sense to them.

Persuade the farmer to cull the cows and take the expense of disposal as this will be cheaper in long run, better for the cows, and runs less risk of welfare investigations by RSPCA or Defra/Local Authority – farmer might be resistant to this suggestion. Can't transport to cull – will have to do on farm (see legislation re transport of lame cows).

Carcases and the "walking dead" must be disposed of by licensed contractors. Burial on farm is not possible. Animals may be euthanased by a suitably qualified collector of carcasses. The National Fallen Stock Company is a voluntary membership organisation (£10/farm membership) and acts as an agent for organising collection of fallen stock at discounted rates; prices may be of the order of £50 to £100 depending upon which contractor has won the successful tender. Some farms have arrangements with local licensed hunt kennels. For cases of specific interest, the VLA undertake post-mortems of adult cattle for a similar price to this disposal fee, but this must be by prior arrangement and agreement to investigate; they do not have the resources to act as a disposal agent. Deaths must be registered with the Cattle Tracing Service/British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS).

Play on the housing estate, farm owner's reputation and the RSPCA visit that is highly likely to ensue. Once out of that field, problem still not over though; out of sight should not be out of mind.

What could be done in policy?

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Due to the welfare issues facing dairy cows (see below) vets may wish to discuss RSPCA welfare standards and/or organic farming systems (e.g. Soil Association) with dairy clients. Veterinary associations may wish to stimulate dialogue with farming industry bodies and the general public (e.g. via the media) about the need for improved welfare standards in dairy farming and how, practically, these can be achieved. There should be a co-operative relationship with animal welfare charities that are aiming to do this in responsible ways.

The increased value conferred by higher welfare (and environmental) standards needs to be communicated effectively to consumers to justify the higher costs involved. These costs should be placed in the context of other goods and foods that consumers regularly buy.

Further information

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- Welfare issues in dairy farming

Dairy cows carry the double burden of producing large quantities of milk, whilst at the same time trying to maintain body condition and carry their next calf. This imposes great demands which can result in a number of conditions that can seriously compromise welfare, e.g.

Lameness - Research, carried out by the University of Bristol on over 5000 dairy cows, showed that at any one time over 20% of the cows were lame and that on some farms the amount of lameness was significantly underestimated by the producer.

Mastitis - Current estimates (2008) of clinical mastitis are that it occurs at a rate of approximately 40 quarter cases per 100 cows per year. This figure has remained unchanged for almost twenty years.

Production-related diseases (e.g. hypocalcaemia, hypomagnesaemia, ketosis) - Occur as a result of the animals being unable to satisfy the demands for milk and calf production placed upon them.

Infertility - In many herds the forced culling rate is around 25% every year. Infertility in itself is not a specific welfare problem, but can be an indicator of poor welfare, as a result of factors such as metabolic stress and calving problems.

Housing during the winter period - Keeping cows comfortable during the winter housing period is essential in order to ensure their welfare. However, evidence suggests this is not always achieved. Over the years, cows have got bigger, but in many cases the housing system has not grown to accommodate this size increase. Consequently, some cows are a foot longer than the lying space allocated to them. Often, the only way to address this is through capital investment in new buildings, but if finances within the industry preclude such investment, this is obviously detrimental to the welfare of the animals.

Breeding - Selective breeding policies over the years have primarily focussed on increasing the productivity of the dairy cow. This drive for increasing levels of production has been acknowledged by many as a key factor associated with many of the health and welfare problems suffered by modern dairy cows. The welfare consequences of selective breeding in the dairy industry were discussed at the 2009 BVA AWF Annual Discussion Forum and are also discussed in two recent reports (FAWC Opinion on the Welfare of the Dairy Cow, 2009; EFSA Opinion on Dairy Cow Welfare and Disease 2009).

Other welfare issues in dairy farming: calf rearing; removal of calf from cow; disbudding; “super dairies”/zero-grazing.

Further information

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- British Cattle Veterinary Association
- DairyCo, the Dairy Farming Information Centre - This is the levy body for the dairy industry. They have produced a lameness scoring DVD free for farmers and vets.
- RSPCA – Dairy Cattle, Key Welfare Issues and Freedom Food welfare standards
- The University of Bristol Healthy Feet Project - The aim of the project is to help reduce lameness in dairy cattle on UK farms and encourage farmers, vet s and advisors to work together. The website provides information and tools for people who are keen to reduce lameness in dairy cows.
- The Soil Association Organic farmers are encouraged to use native breeds of cow (like Dairy Shorthorn). These are rarely capable of yielding as much milk as modern dairy breeds, but are well adapted to making good use of home grown forage (grass, hay or silage) to produce milk, and may be hardier and less susceptible to disease.

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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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VET SCHOOL CHALLENGE

Thank you for taking part

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